

Rabindranath Tagore



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DANGEROUS DERELICT

By the same Author

HOUSE OF HATRED

DYNAMITE

NORTH-WEST MAIL

CITY OF FEAR

KHYBER CONTRABAND

PATHAN TREASURE

FRONTIER FIRES

LIQUID FURY

CARFAX OF THE KHYBER

INDIAN ARTIFEX

NINE-FIFTEEN FROM VICTORIA

PERMANENT WAY THROUGH THE KHYBER

Cont.
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DANGEROUS DERELICT

by
VICTOR BAYLEY



ROBERT HALE LIMITED
102 GREAT RUSSELL STREET
LONDON W.C.1

First published 1941

H. J. - College
Ac no 8821

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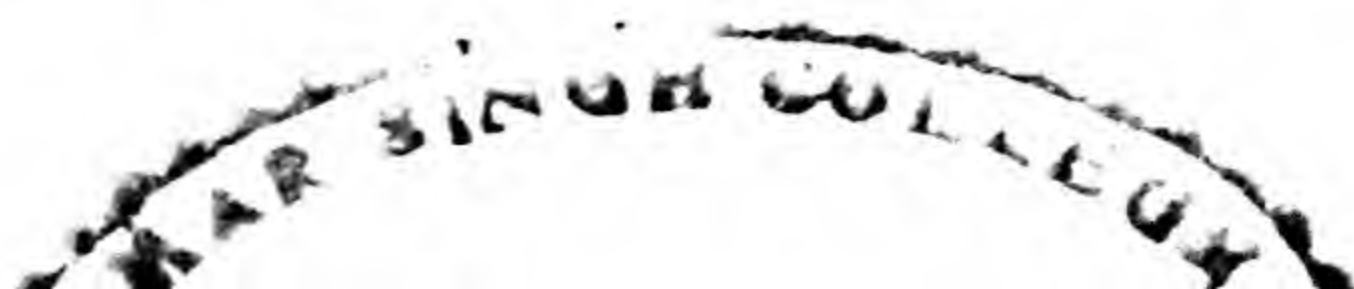
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
NORTHUMBERLAND PRESS LIMITED
GATESHEAD ON TYNE

CHAPTER ONE

It was when I was an Executive Engineer in the Public Works Department in India that I first met Donovan. I had been posted to the Rajshahi Railway Construction, a new line about a hundred miles in length which cut off a handsome slice from the journey up-country from Bombay to the north-west by means of a great chord. The work has long since been finished and it now forms part of the main line from Bombay to the north. I was in my early thirties when I was appointed to a Division on the new line, and it was while I was doing my job of work as a railway engineer that I became involved in the curious affair of Donovan.

Yes, curious is the right word. There was about the whole business an odd mixture of comedy and tragedy. Perhaps I might have handled the affair differently if I had then had the balance that wider experience has now given me. But I am not sure. These things have a way of acquiring a sort of momentum of their own so that one is carried along with a tragic inevitability. But you shall judge for yourself whether I was to blame or not.

I will introduce Donovan as soon as possible, but first I must make a few things plain so that he may fit easily into the picture. I shall have to talk a certain amount of shop and that is just the trouble, for engineers are dumb dogs and the public knows very little about the sort of life they lead when they are going about their wonderful work. Of course I am not going to pretend that we are marvellous people working miracles for the benefit of mankind. We are just honest craftsmen earning our living like anyone else—but there is an element



of wonder about our work, for we wage a ceaseless war against Nature. We have to harness the great sources of power that make themselves manifest in the world, and we have the uneasy consciousness that these powers resent being bitted and curbed. Thus we are always on active service against a relentless enemy that pardons no mistake and overlooks no weakness—an enemy who will bring our works crashing down in ruin if we have neglected our defences.

But there is deep satisfaction in the combat, and when I heard that I was to have a Division of the new railway to build I was aware of a thrill of joy at the thought of the months and years of struggle that lay ahead. My Division was about forty miles in length and it lay in a little known tract of country amid the Native States of Rajputana. There are, of course, no unexplored areas in India—a vast country indeed, but one which has been very completely mapped by the Indian Survey Department. But there are plenty of remote places far from railways or roads where the people live their own life in teeming towns and villages with never a sight of a white man from one year to another, and it was to such a district that I had to go and start the construction of the railway.

I found that my Division lay almost entirely in Sanganir State—a Hindu State ruled by a venerable and much beloved Maharajah, a Rajput of the fine old aristocratic school. The State was about the size of Wales and it was contented and prosperous. The method of rule was feudal and it worked reasonably well according to the standards that the people of Sanganir desired. They were taxed lightly and left very much to themselves on the whole. They lived their own lives in blissful ignorance of everything save agricultural skill and the knowledge of a few simple trades. The Brahmins looked after the things spiritual, the Rajputs managed the things temporal, while the two lower castes provided the heredi-

tary tradesmen and villagers, each in that station of life to which he had been born without hope or desire of ever getting out of it. So simple in essentials is the Hindu caste system.

My headquarters was near a considerable township named Barwara, and it took me a week to get there from the nearest railway station. I arrived with a cavalcade of bullock carts containing stores and a stout band of foremen and supervisors skilled in railway work. I need not enter into details, for it was largely a matter of routine to collect together the necessary staff and the miscellaneous supplies they would require. Railway construction is a well-established business in India and there is a large body of specialists available at all times for the asking. The news that a new work is being started soon spreads through the bazaars and I was besieged by crowds of men seeking employment. At the time of which I write we were rapidly settling down to the job and I had a chance to take a look round at everything in peace and quiet after the turmoil of straightening out a hundred initial tangles. I had collected a capable staff of subordinates, grave, elderly men wise with much experience and having an honourable record of many generations of faithful service to the Government.

I had built for myself a tiny bungalow with a thatched roof standing in a glade of mango trees on a slight eminence. It was a pleasant spot, and I sat contentedly on the little verandah after the day's work enjoying the genial rays of the warm sun of a Rajputana winter. It was cold enough at night to make a low fire enjoyable in my sitting-room, which I had furnished bachelor fashion with a comfortable armchair as the principal article of furniture. My old servant Abdul looked after me as though I were his son and I had every reason to be well satisfied with the way things were shaping.

But there was, as usual, a fly in the amber. It was

only a slight annoyance and it did not really matter. But I must mention it because it was really the cause of the whole Donovan affair. I am sorry to keep referring to technicalities, but there it is—it just has to be. I have said that we were settling down to all the routine of railway construction with its daily crop of minor or major troubles to solve. The actual line of the railway was beginning to take shape along the whole of my forty miles of its length and I felt that the first fences had been surmounted satisfactorily. Judge of my annoyance then, when I received orders from the Chief Engineer to examine the possibilities of a re-alignment from one point to another about fifteen miles apart. I have a great dislike to a change of plan once work is well started, and the proposed re-alignment did not appeal to me as likely to be any improvement, although I had to admit that this could only be decided by a proper survey. I had dispersed my surveying staff and I now had no one to spare for the new survey without a measure of disorganization that seemed to me to be rather unnecessary. So I was feeling a little ruffled at the Chief's orders and at having to take men off urgent work for a survey which I was sure would prove to be so much wasted effort.

And so we come to Donovan. I was sitting on my verandah one evening, enjoying a rest after returning from my rounds. My pony was having a well-earned meal of corn under the eyes of a syce, while a pleasant pungent smell of wood-smoke permeated the air from the cooking fires of many huts. My riding camel was brought forward for inspection by grey-bearded Boota Singh, the camel man, and it squatted contentedly on the ground, chewing the cud with excruciating squeaks from its sharp teeth and with many a horrible digestive rumble. Old Abdul fussed round with a flick of his duster here and there, while down the path into the setting sun walked a chaprassi taking back to the office a

bundle of papers which I had just signed. It was all very familiar and peaceful and I munched cake and sipped tea in a bland mood of placid enjoyment. It was then that Abdul approached with the bristles of his beard registering disapproval.

"A white man has come," he observed tartly. He did not say that a Sahib had come as he would have done if one of my colleagues had ridden over for a few days' stay, as sometimes happened. He used the word 'gora', meaning simply a white man, and from the tone of his voice he did not approve of the person at all.

"A white man?" I repeated in some astonishment, wondering who on earth could have arrived unexpectedly. "Give him my salaam."

"He is not one to whom a salaam is given," observed Abdul. He was a stickler for etiquette and permitted no breach of the rules in my house. "I will call him."

"Bring a chair," I ordered, and Abdul hesitated. He muttered something into his beard but he brought the chair. And then Donovan came round the corner of the bungalow, while I stood up to receive him. At the sight of him I groaned inwardly, for I recognized the type at once. A derelict white man! The wreck of what had once been something very different! He shuffled forward awkwardly with a shame-faced air of defiance and a pitiful attempt to keep his shifty, bibulous eyes from roving round the horizon.

These pests appear from time to time at the door of most bungalows in India. Not very often, perhaps, but often enough to try the patience of householders. There is always a plausible hard-lines story. Perhaps it is of a brother who has got him a job in Bombay and he only wants the price of a railway ticket to get there. Too often there is a sanctimonious whine when the creature pulls a Bible out of his pocket and declares that he has sold everything but this that his mother had

given him. The interview ends in a few rupees being handed over which the derelict spends at once in drink or drugs before going on his way through the infinitely compassionate countryside of India. From village to village he is passed on by timid headmen who supply him with food so that the miserable derelict may travel hundreds or even thousands of miles before death from disease or drink overtakes him. The hardiest may wander for years from one end of India to another, bullying, cadging, whining their way from one village to the next and ever becoming more and more ragged and unkempt. So it was that I regarded this specimen of the tribe with much disfavour, hardly knowing what to say, for I did not expect to encounter a derelict in this remote part of Rajputana.

The man relieved me of the embarrassment of uttering some sort of a welcome. He shuffled forward with outstretched hand which I took. I could almost feel Abdul's glance of disapproval burning into my back as I did so. "It's good to see a white face again," the man said, and I was surprised at the tone of his voice. It was not the sort of voice to be expected from a down-and-out.

"Well," I ventured untruthfully, "I'm glad to see you. How did you get here?"

"Walked. On my flat feet. Look at them!" His boots were indeed a lamentable sight.

"Won't you sit down," I went on after a short pause, and he took a chair with a murmur of thanks. There was a loud flap from Abdul's duster and the old man stumped off in high dudgeon to the back of the bungalow. I knew that I should receive a tart lecture from him later for this breach of etiquette, and I did indeed feel that the owners of the many eyes that were doubtless upon me would strongly resent this method of receiving one who was obviously and emphatically a most undesirable visitor.

"Cigarette?" I held out my case.

"Thanks." The claw-like hand that shot out trembled with eagerness. It was none too clean nor were his clothes. He had a horrid sort of beard and whiskers while his hair under his battered topee was dreadfully matted. He sat on his chair with an attempt to appear at his ease and all the while he trembled slightly as though his nerves were vibrating. Once or twice he looked me squarely in the eye but not for long. His bleary looks were soon turned aside from my unfriendly regard. I ought to have slipped a couple of rupees into his hand and to have told him to begone, but there was something about him that restrained me. I have already mentioned the cultured voice that so belied his appearance, giving a hint of something else that he had not yet abandoned when he started to go downhill to the inevitable end. He was indeed a wretched little trembling wisp of a man trying desperately to recapture something of that which he had lost, but a kindly twilight was swiftly spreading over the land so that the man's appearance became blurred while his voice retained its timbre and stirred my curiosity.

"Why have you come to see me?" I asked.

"I thought you might give me a job," he answered with a swift sidelong glance, and there was another awkward pause. Just then Abdul returned bringing, according to custom, a tray with whisky and soda for me. I liked sitting in the dusk after tea while the stars came out and the whole countryside went to sleep with many drowsy sounds, and it was my habit to enjoy a modest peg while I did so. So Abdul brought the usual array of bottles—but only one glass. He did not stay as usual to pour out my peg but stumped off without a word.

"Have a drink?" I said and immediately regretted my hospitable impulse.

"Thanks." A skinny claw shot out to grasp the tumbler with shaking fingers. The whisky disappeared

in one gulp, but I did not offer to refill the glass. I told myself that it was sheer idiocy to ply the man with liquor. "My God! That was good! The native stuff is awful. Rots your guts and burns them like fire," he said. The drink had steadied him and he had ceased to tremble, while a more human look came into his eye so that he did not look so much like a lost dog.

I felt that the situation was getting very awkward. I ought to have sent the fellow packing at once and that was exactly what Abdul would have cordially approved. The old man hovered about in the background flicking his duster here and there in a gesture which I knew well betokened that he was ruffled with indignation. But somehow I could not bring myself to dismiss the miserable wretch and we continued to talk intermittently about nothing in particular. I was uncomfortably conscious that we were being watched furtively by my whole establishment, and soon it was the derelict who sat more at ease while I was wrestling with the situation. It would have been a different matter in a settled station with a number of other bungalows all round me, but here in the jungle far away from all white folk I could not bring myself to send him out into the gathering darkness.

"What is your name?" I asked. "Mine is Vallender. Peter Vallender. I am Executive Engineer here."

He hesitated for an instant before replying. "Call me anything you like. Call me Donovan. That will do as well as any other name." He laughed quietly as at some hidden joke and I was astonished to see how relaxation of the misery in his face softened his features. "Donovan. That will do very nicely."

"Look here, Donovan," I said, taking the plunge, "I can't turn you out into the jungle at this time of night. I will put you up for the night if you like. I can let you have a tent and a few necessaries. I suppose you have nothing of your own?"

"Nothing. No, nothing at all except . . . well, nothing that counts."

"It doesn't matter. I can lend you whatever you want. Will you dine with me to-night?"

Donovan stared at me and blinked with sheer surprise. "What?" he said. "What did you say? Dine with you?"

"Of course." I trembled to think what Abdul would say. "Why not? In an hour's time. You might like to have a clean up before then. . . ."

He still stared at me in a dazed sort of way. "Look here, are you making a fool of me? If so, I think it's a pretty dirty trick. . . . I'm sorry. It's so long since anyone asked me to dinner. . . . Of course I shall be delighted . . . that's the right answer, isn't it?"

"That's settled then," I said, taking the matter lightly for Donovan had begun to tremble and shake again.

"Decent of you," he muttered. "I haven't had a meal of English food since . . . lots of native stuff. It's easy to get that . . . My clothes!"

In for a penny in for a pound! "I'll lend you some clothes too. After dinner we will have a talk. I fancy it will interest you. If not . . . well, we will say good-bye to-morrow morning, eh?"

"Oh, you'll kick me out in the morning all right. I've heard that sort of talk before. It's no good. No good at all, I tell you. You are wasting your time. Better kick me out now. I'm too far gone, damn you, and I don't want any of your bloody favours or psalm-singing." He spoke rapidly in a nervously defiant manner that affected me more than his previous attitude of dumb misery.

"Don't be an ass, man," I said roughly. "Do I look like a psalm-singer?"

With an effort he managed to get himself under better control. "Sorry!" he mumbled and then with a flash

of spirit, "I meant it. I'm too far gone. You are wasting your time."

"We'll see about that after dinner. That's the tent over there that I keep for anyone who blows in. It is furnished with most things. I'll send you shaving tackle and some clean clothes. In an hour's time, then. I have a good clean-up myself after the day's work before grub."

"Pukka Sahib changing for dinner in the jungle," he sneered.

"That's the idea," I answered, determined not to take offence at his absurdly defiant flashes of ill-humour. "Also a little common sense in putting on warmer clothes against the sudden chill of the night air."

"I know. That's the worst thing. Cold! It's curious how damned cold India can be at night. Sorry my manners are so foul. But if you knew . . . oh, well, it doesn't matter. You'll kick me out in the morning right enough." With a sudden decision he got up and walked jerkily away to the tent and I went into my tiny bungalow, little more than a hut, to interview the outraged Abdul.

"Sahib! Has the man gone?"

"Not yet. Not until the morning. He will take dinner with me." There was an ominous pause. "Also clean clothes and washing things must be put in his tent. Make all arrangements, Abdul."

"Sahib, I am an old man and doubtless grown very foolish in my old age. Do not shame me before all men."

"Nonsense! He is a poor man. There is no shame in feeding the poor."

"Without doubt. Let the man be given food in his hand and be told to go and eat it elsewhere far from the Presence's bungalow. That would be a truly charitable thing to do."

"He is a white man. That is different."

"Truly his skin is fair. But he is no Sahib. I say

that that is different. He will rob you and steal away in the night. Maybe he will murder you," Abdul went on with complacent relish.

"What nonsense! He will stay the night here and to-morrow morning he will go away unless I give him a job on the railway." There was another ominous pause at this and the duster flicked at imaginary dust on the furniture with venomous eloquence.

"I have often told the Sahib that he is a little mad. No more and no less than the other Sahibs who are well known to be also a little mad," Abdul observed with a manner of exaggerated respect. "But nevertheless a little mad. It is true that I am of no importance in the household of the Sahib. I do but do as I am ordered . . ."

"You know quite well, Abdul, that you run the bungalow exactly as you like and that I dare not alter anything lest you leave my service in a huff." This was a well-known jest between us, but it now fell rather flat.

"Not so! I am the Sahib's servant. If I am to be shamed by having to wait at table upon a 'gora' of no account, then I am to be shamed. There is nothing more to be said. I will do as I am ordered, but to-morrow I beg leave to depart." It was evident that the old man's feelings were deeply stirred though I did not take his threat to depart very seriously. He had often announced his intention of giving notice, but nothing ever came of it and I tactfully refrained from referring to the matter. Once he did indeed carry out his threat, but within a week was back, having found new service elsewhere intolerable—as intolerable as I had found a new servant.

"As to waiting at table, some other plan might be found." There was an incredulous flick of the duster. "There is that kitchen boy who worked when you had fever . . ."

"A mere coolie!" the old man exclaimed, but the

He was 25-2!

duster no longer flicked. Instead it was used to wipe the back of a chair in a meditative fashion.

"A mere coolie, as you say. Nevertheless under careful instruction from an experienced man he might accomplish something."

And so with care and tact the difficulty was surmounted, though it was plain that my whole household was outraged by my decision. But once Abdul had accepted the proposed compromise he faithfully did his part and my orders were grudgingly carried out. I splashed in my bath, feeling that I was doing the right thing by Donovan, outcast though he was, and I got into warmer clothes with a glow in my heart at the consciousness of a good deed done in a naughty world.

I waited for him on the verandah where I ate my meals and presently he came into the circle of light thrown by a lamp set on a table laid for two. He was a grotesque figure in my clothes. I am six feet in my socks and he cannot have been more than five foot four. My clothes hung around him in festoons and he had had to roll up the trousers and coat-sleeves to make some sort of a fit out of them. And yet he was a changed man. He had shaved and brushed his hair, revealing his gaunt hollow cheeks, but he carried himself with an air, no longer of insolent bravado but of a man of breeding. I had forgotten to provide him with shoes and anyway it would have been useless to expect him to wear my number tens. His footwear was lamentable, but that did not seem to matter. He should have been a figure of fun, but he came forward easily as though he were entering a drawing-room.

"I've done the best I can with your clothes, Vallender. Many thanks for them."

"That's all right. Shall we dine straight away or will you have a drink first?"

There was a slight pause and then Donovan declined the drink rather breathlessly. We sat down at the table

and the kitchen boy began his ministrations. I noticed Abdul hovering about agonizedly in the background trying to make the clumsy lad do his work without disaster, but he spilt the soup and dropped things through sheer nervousness. Donovan pretended not to notice anything out of the way and we conversed in a desultory way while he ate as though he were famished. The boy dumped a bottle of whisky on the table and Donovan's hand shot out to grasp it. It was his only lapse and he retracted his fingers at the very moment that they were ready to seize the bottle.

"That's all right," I said. "Help yourself."

"No thanks. I think not. You see . . . well, you have been rather decent to me. I had better not."

The awkward moment was skated round by both of us without much finesse and I ostentatiously started another topic. I tried once or twice to get Donovan to talk about himself, but without any success at all. He blandly evaded my questions and I forbore to press them too hard. But as the meal progressed I became more and more aware that he was no ordinary derelict. I could not exactly place him. A cashiered Army officer? No, he did not seem to fill the part. One of my own service in the Public Works Department who had got the chuck for swindling? That did not come right either. I set one or two innocent traps for him by asking some technical question, but he did not fall into them. He puzzled me considerably.

To my astonishment Abdul himself handed the pudding round. No doubt the kitchen boy's blundering service had driven the old man to distraction. But it was not that which had induced him to abandon his attitude of non-recognition of the stranger. I verily believe it was that he detected something beneath the man's grotesque appearance just as surely as I did. There is no one so quick to detect these intangible things as an Indian servant and Abdul was one of the

finest class. When he followed up by handing coffee to Donovan I was convinced that Abdul had made up his mind about the derelict. It strengthened me in my resolution to give him a chance to get back to a decent life.

We had enjoyed a good meal and we were smoking a cigarette over a cup of coffee when I broached the subject. "Look here, Donovan," I said bluntly. "I dare say you have noticed that I have been trying once or twice to get you to talk about yourself. I wish you would. I mean it, and I have a reason for saying so." He looked at me with an air of polite inquiry, but he did not say anything. "All right, please yourself. But I am wondering whether you would like to get back to . . . well, something better than wandering about India. I may be able to help you."

"Very kind of you," he said with icy politeness.

"Don't be an ass and hold me at arm's length for no reason," I answered, rather nettled by his manner.

"What's the good? I suppose you mean you will try and set me on my feet. Lend me money and all that. Go away and make a new start somewhere. I know the sort of pious talk. I've heard it all before. One of them gave me a Bible as well. Well, there are two reasons why I refuse—three reasons."

"Damn bad ones, I expect."

"Oh, no. Very good ones. One is that I don't want your high and mighty charity. The second is that I should only spend the money on drink and . . . and drugs. The third is that you have been decent to me and there is still a spark of decency in me that responds. I won't trick you with a packet of lies about running straight."

"I've never heard such nonsense," I protested.

"It's not nonsense. I can tell a jolly good story. It has worked again and again. The bloody fools hand over cash and think they have reclaimed a lost soul. Missionaries are easy money—newly arrived ones. The

older ones are a bit more canny. But you don't really need much money. There's an easier way . . ." For a moment it seemed that he was going to tell me something, but he stopped suddenly.

"If you will listen patiently," I interrupted, "I will tell you what I propose to offer you."

"I've already told you I won't take your money."

"Shut up and listen."

"Why should I? Do you think I don't see how you all despise me in your hearts. It makes you feel good to play with a poor devil like me for a day or two. Do you think I didn't spot that your man wouldn't wait on me and that a coolie boy had to be got to do the trick? Do you think I enjoy cringing and letting everyone kick me . . ."

"I wish you would shut up and not talk a lot of bosh."

Donovan had started to tremble and shake again and that beastly shifty look had come into his eye. The good food had obviously done him good, but it also gave him strength to grow defiant with the weak obstinacy of conscious inferiority. But I was bent on pushing my plan through and I silenced him with a show of anger that I was far from feeling.

"I'm not talking bosh," he almost shouted, his voice rising to a shrill pitch.

"You just listen to me and keep your mouth shut for a bit. I dislike your manner and I resent it."

"Wha—what?"

"You heard what I said. Now listen. It so happens that I am in need of an extra hand. The Chief has sent me orders to run a trial survey along a proposed re-alignment of the railway I am building. I don't think there is anything in it myself, but orders are orders. For reasons I won't trouble you with, it would be inconvenient, to say the least of it, to take my regular staff off their present work. It will be a troublesome job because the proposed line runs right through a patch of

rather thick jungle. Once the jungle is cut it won't take long to run instruments over the line. I could spare the time to do that myself. But I can't spare anyone to supervise the jungle-cutting. Have I made myself clear? "

" Yes. . . . Do you mean that you are offering me the job of boss of the jungle-clearing gang? "

" Of course. Will you take it? The pay will be only fifty rupees a month, but you can live on that here. Your quarters will be free."

" You are offering me a job? Me? "

" Yes. Not much of a job and you can turn the offer down if you like."

" It's no good. I'm too far gone," he said in a shaking voice.

" Rot! Think it over and let me know in the morning."

" Why are you doing this? "

" Why? I don't know. Maybe because Christmas is so near and I don't fancy turning you into the jungle. Maybe because, as you seem to think, I am a fool. But perhaps it's because I've got a little common sense. You had better take the job. It's a chance to get away from the life you have been living."

" My God! If only I could! " Donovan's carefully studied air of indifference began to break down. " You don't know what it's like. To have people run with fear when they see you! They treat you like a wild animal. They put food on the ground where you can get it in the hope that you will take it and go on to the next village. It's too easy! You have only to shout and threaten and they run and fetch food and drink. Sometimes they turn out in a body with sticks and drive you away so that you go hungry. Like an animal! That's what I've got down to and it's too late to get up again."

He said all this in a rapid, flustered voice rising to a thin shriek at times. I let him go on, hoping that

he would give me a clue to his identity, but I could distinguish nothing definite in his quick speech. Now that he had let himself go he poured out a torrent of words that left me horrified with its revelation of the depth to which a human being could descend. It was indeed as he himself put it—as though he had become an animal, a lost dog, wandering through India from one village to another and occasionally cadging a little money from European stations that he encountered. Stations which rapidly became too hot to hold him.

“ . . . When I heard that you were here I meant to come and cadge a few rupees or maybe a bottle of whisky from you. It's too easy. They are glad to get rid of me as a rule at so small a price. I thought I might touch you for ten rupees or so. It's the truth I'm telling you. I'm not whining now. I won't take your money. I'll clear out in the morning. You've given me a last look at the place I have lost. I don't know whether to thank you or hate you for it. To-morrow I go back into the gutter . . . Oh my God! ” He gasped and sobbed in an effort to continue. “ Back to crawling and cringing and threatening and bullying! Back to filthy native food and liquor that rots your guts! Back to dirt and misery, bugs and lice! I would make an end of it all only I haven't the guts even to do that.” Tears of self-pity trickled down his cheeks and he was a most unlovely spectacle. “ I'm no good. Even now I'm trying to make you sorry for me so that I can cadge from you. . . . ”

And so he ran on babbling a mixture of whining appeal and, I thought, genuine remorse. It was all most unpleasant, and I preferred his previous defiant insolence to this utter breakdown of all restraint. But an obstinate determination to stick to my offer prevented me from breaking off in wearied disgust. Instead I mixed a strong whisky and made him drink it. It was about the worst thing I could have done to him in his overstrained condition. He became noisy and abusive

and banged the table till things were upset. He shouted and cursed, but through it all he managed to keep his unruly tongue from giving away anything about himself though I tried to goad him into telling me. Finally he wept untidily with horrid gulps and gasps, huddled in his chair in hopeless abandon of all control. The emotional storm blew itself out and he grew quieter sitting with his face in his hands. I noticed a gold signet ring on the third finger of his left hand and I wondered idly why he had not parted with it long ago.

The scandalized Abdul cleared the table in dignified silence. There was an air of complacent triumph mixed with his dignified but reproachful manner. Abdul had a most expressive back and his silence was far more eloquent than words. And I could not help feeling that the old man was quite right. He thought that I ought to have driven the derelict away so that the orderly routine of our little settlement could remain unruffled by his untimely intrusion. Yet here I was committed to engaging the man on my staff—unless, as I began secretly to hope, he refused to take the job.

Donovan pulled himself together after a fashion and muttered excuses. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I won't come unstuck again. Neurasthenic, that's what I am. That's what the doctors told me in hospital—highly neurasthenic patient, they said. No bloody self-control, that's what it means in plain English."

"No, it doesn't," I said. "I'm sure no doctor told you that."

"Oh no! He preferred long Greek words."

"Who was he?" I asked with elaborate carelessness, but Donovan did not fall into the obvious trap.

"I never heard his name. I had better turn in, Valender. I shan't sleep much. I shall be gone in the morning so I'll say good-bye now."

"Don't be a fool, Donovan. You'll take that job."

"I should let you down if I did."

"I'll take the risk."

"You needn't worry. Good-bye."

He rose jerkily with his features twitching and without a word walked quickly to his tent. I let him go. In fact I was glad to see him go, for I was already regretting the impulse that had made me try to help him on to his feet again. I suffered acute embarrassment and discomfort at the sight of his breakdown, a feeling which was mixed with contempt, I am afraid, for such repulsive weakness. And yet I was glad that I had not turned him away.

I turned in early and Abdul fussed round the room according to custom, making sure that I had everything for the night. He put something under the pillow.

"What are you doing, Abdul?"

"It is the Presence's pistol. Otherwise the gora will rob you and murder you in your sleep."

"What next? Is it loaded?"

"I do not know. If it is not, it will be well if the Presence loads it."

"Nonsense!"

"It is not nonsense. It is sound sense. That man is an evil one. Maybe he was a Sahib once. But he is one no longer. Such men are known. They are very evil. It is true that you have given him a job on the railway, but nothing but misfortune will come of such madness. I say nothing against the charitable feeding of the poor. Even though I was shamed by the manner of feeding him, I will say nothing more. The respect in which I am held by all men will not suffer much when it is known that I did what I did by the Sahib's order. But what will men say when they hear that this evil one has been appointed to receive pay from the Government whom he has doubtless cheated? Why else should the Government have cast him out?"

Thus Abdul grumbled on until it was time for him to go. He fired one last shot. "Is it an order that early

morning tea is to be given to the man? ”

“ You needn't trouble. He refused the appointment I offered and said that he would be gone early in the morning.”

“ Very good talk! ” replied Abdul with great satisfaction.

CHAPTER TWO

NEXT morning I awoke with the uncomfortable feeling that there was something wrong, and sure enough a few moments after waking I remembered Donovan. Abdul brought me my early morning cup of tea in grim silence, and I sensed that he was still feeling huffed and disapproving. I usually enjoyed a short lazy spell in bed in the morning sipping my tea while our little settlement awoke to its daily routine. It was a pleasant quarter of an hour, for I slept under the stars right out in the open on a concrete platform and, when I woke, the genial sun climbed up from the eastern horizon and added a warm touch to the chill air of the dawn wind.

There was a clank from the syce's bucket as he led up my sturdy country-bred pony for its morning feed of gram, and Boota Singh too approached with a slow, dignified tread leading my riding camel, which as a great luxury received a couple of handfuls of corn. The great brute was content enough with an extraordinary diet of thorny branches of trees and shrubs which were too prickly for any human being to handle. But Boota Singh assured me that an enormous accession of strength would come to the Jabberwock, as I had christened the ugly creature, if he were given a small daily feed of gram. So there he was, folded up like a foot-rule and munching noisily at the corn, and at the same time watching apprehensively with bulbous eyes to see whether anyone contemplated the unheard-of outrage of making him do a job of work. The water-carrier splodged his way from a well carrying a shiny goat-skin bursting with a dozen

tiny leaks, while a blue coil of wood-smoke rose from the cookhouse and lay flat on the motionless air in curious streaks. It was a comfortable, contented household, and I should have enjoyed my tea and the first cigarette of the day but for the horrid knowledge that I had admitted a serpent into our Eden.

True the man had said that he would be gone in the morning, but I was none too sure of that. In fact I was acutely aware of an air of restraint everywhere, as though every one of my people knew and disapproved of what I had done and, worse still, knew that the cause of the trouble was still there. With a fatuous attempt at self-deception I forbore to ask whether the man had gone, and old Abdul did not volunteer any information. He brought my slippers and took away the empty cup in grim silence save for an announcement in a testy voice that the bath was ready. I rose with a sigh for the lost peace of Eden and was soon ready dressed for breakfast and the day's work.

During breakfast I obstinately refused to make any inquiry about the man. I told Abdul that I should use the Jabberwock, and presently a series of protesting howls proclaimed to the four winds that he was being led up to the verandah where Boota Singh told him in the camel language to squat. The Jabberwock raised a greater uproar than ever about this, and Boota Singh shouted a stream of abuse at his female relations so that the air was filled with lamentations and outcries which fitted diabolically well into the jangled circumstances of the headquarters of my Division of the Rajshahi Railway Construction.

But there was no need to ask whether Donovan had gone. When I had finished breakfast I went out on to the verandah hoping to get away on the hairy back of the Jabberwock from all the discomfort of my household. But it was not to be. As soon as I appeared the derelict shambled forward dressed in my clothes, looking

more grotesque than ever in the bright sunshine of the morning.

"Good morning," Donovan said miserably, standing there and trembling slightly. He was so utterly forlorn that my impatience and disgust with him melted away.

"Good morning," I replied. "Have you had any breakfast?"

"Not yet. It doesn't matter. I am not very good at breakfast. I've come to tell you that I have decided to accept your offer. I was a damned fool last night and beastly rude too. You see I have had to put up with a lot of psalm-singing and it has got me down. No one has ever offered me a job—until you did. Decent of you. Well, I'll take it. I warn you I'm no good and I shall let you down. No good at all. I'm not whining—just stating a fact. Born rotter . . ." He mumbled on in a depressed monotone while all round my people stood staring at him. It was rather pitiful—we were all so hostile.

I ought to have told the poor wretch that my offer was no longer open. I ought to have told him to get out and stay out. Every prompting of prudence urged me to let common sense have its way and rid the camp of the presence of an undesirable. Boota Singh stood there with his finely chiselled Rajput features set in an expression of stern contempt. The syce squatted motionless, forgetting to remove the empty bucket from under my pony's nose while he stared at Donovan. The water-carrier on his way back to the well with his deflated goat-skin found an excuse for a minute facing us so that he could add his accusing silence to the rest. The cook and the kitchen boy emerged from the cookhouse, while Abdul made his presence felt behind me on the verandah. There was no sound save a clanking from the bucket while pony vainly tried to extract a few more grains from its empty hollow. Even the Jabberwock ceased its noisy bellowings and contemplated perplexed

humanity with a sardonic expression of half-humorous contempt.

Donovan stood there surrounded by a complete ring of dislike and downright hostility. A miserable figure of depression shaking as though with an ague, waiting for me to pronounce sentence of banishment back to the hopeless life of a derelict. All my household waited for it, but I could not do that thing. It was foolish of me, but I could not do it. I flung prudence to the winds. I allowed myself to be actuated by sentiment instead of reason. It would be Christmas next week! How on earth could I turn a dog away at such a time?

"All right, Donovan. Come with me to the office. I will fix you up there."

There was a sort of a sigh or groan from everyone and the curious tension relaxed. The syce lifted the bucket and led the pony away, while the water-carrier stopped looking for an imaginary thorn in his foot and shuffled off to the well. Abdul and the cook disappeared leaving me alone with Donovan and Boota Singh. I told Boota Singh to wait a few minutes and he responded with a sonorous "Hukum!" The Jabberwock grasped that there was a respite from the indignity of labour and resumed the chewing of a cud regurgitated horribly up the length of its long neck.

Donovan and I walked across to the enclosure where the quarters for the staff and an office building of sundried brick fitted into the Rajputana landscape. The office was a simple and unpretentious affair containing a couple of rooms for the clerks, a drawing office, and a room for myself. A messenger preceded the dignified head clerk in a tiny procession carrying papers as soon as I had arrived. For a moment their expression of respectful welcome failed to conceal a quick glance of hostile curiosity at Donovan, whom I told to wait outside.

It did not take long to dispose of the papers. Chota Lal, my excellent head clerk, had everything in apple-

pie order as usual. He had an immense experience of railway construction and his gentle grey head contained an inexhaustible fund of precedents for all situations. He was invariably victorious in the many battles with the Audit Officer which add so much relish to the daily round of the monotonous shuffling of many papers. This morning he was complacently triumphant as he asked me to sign a crushing rejoinder to an Objection Statement forwarded by the Audit Officer from the far-off headquarters of the Chief Engineer.

“Sir, the Audit Officer has completely overlooked Section 243(b) of Fundamental Rules. Also Sub-section (e) of paragraph 675 of Construction Code.”

The intricacies of the many checks and counter-checks of the Indian financial system, though doubtless very salutary, were quite beyond my comprehension and seemed to have very little relation to real things. However, I signed something or other in triplicate and Chota Lal sighed with content as at a shrewd blow delivered at the enemy.

“That is all, Sir. I will have other papers ready when you return in the evening. Please also to witness payment to contractors this evening.”

“Very well. There is one other matter. I have engaged a new Overseer. Mr. Donovan.”

There was a short pause, a very short one for Chota Lal was the soul of courtesy as well as of efficiency. “An Overseer? Sir, that will be addition to Regular Establishment.”

“Yes. His pay will be fifty rupees a month.”

“If you please, additions to Regular Establishment need the sanction of the Chief Engineer. Paragraph 142 Sub-section (f) of State Railways Code.”

“All right. Draft a letter for me to sign asking for sanction.”

“Sir, it will be better if he is charged to Works. That will not need sanction of Chief Engineer.”

"Very well, charge his salary to Survey. I am going to put him on to the proposed new alignment."

"Very good, Sir. But subordinates of the rank of Overseer cannot be charged to Works. Section two hundred . . ."

"Don't make difficulties, Chota Lal. Fix him up somehow."

"Sir, if he is designated Mistri, that will be quite in order."

"All right. Call him anything you like."

For some reason there seemed to be an air of triumph again in Chota Lal's demeanour as though he had won another victory, and I had a passing spasm of uneasiness. I thought of the other Mistris, wise old men wrinkled with much technical lore, who had reached their position of greatly respected authority after many years of experience. A Mistri is roughly the equivalent of a charge-hand—not a foreman but none the less a highly qualified man holding a post of limited responsibility. By what right could I suddenly thrust a down-and-out like Donovan into the ranks of these simple men proud of their essential place in my organization? However, the deed was done and I called Donovan into the office to tell him that he was properly engaged.

"Can I sit down?" he asked. "I'm feeling pretty rotten. I usually do in the morning."

"Of course. But you must remember that this is India and not England. From now onwards you must take your place as a Mistri and it is a very humble place. We shall only meet after to-day on a very formal footing. My people would not understand anything else. With their aristocratic traditions they would not tolerate any intimacy or friendship between me and a Mistri. It can't be helped and you will have to conform to their standards. Of course you can come and see me here in this office whenever you like—we shall have a good deal to discuss about the work—but the bungalow

is barred to you. Is that clear? "

" Quite clear. Brutally clear."

" There is no need to make a fuss about it. I have a job of work to do and the job comes first, that's all."

" Yes. I suppose you are right. Can I have an advance of pay? "

" No. I have no power to give advances of pay except for travelling expenses."

" Well . . . I've travelled far enough." The ghost of a grin appeared on Donovan's haggard features.

" It can't be done. But you must have money to make yourself respectable."

" That," observed Donovan, " is a profound truth."

" You know quite well what I mean. You must get some decent clothes. I don't suppose the cut will be anything to write home about, but there are tailors in Barwara city. I don't know what you can do for head-gear, but I dare say you can get a Terai hat which will be all right during the cold weather. I'll lend you thirty rupees. You can pay me back by degrees."

A momentary gleam came into Donovan's eye and the sickening thought occurred to me that he would blue the whole lot in drink. But I was determined to go ahead with my idea of reclaiming the man if it were possible and I handed over the money to him.

" Thanks. What about quarters? "

" There is a newly built Mistri's quarter vacant. It isn't much of a place."

" That's all right. For months I have been sleeping in . . . in any sort of place."

We talked about this and that for a short time and I explained the simple duties required of him on the work. He was intelligent and did not need telling twice, though there was not much to tell him. I showed him on the map where the proposed re-alignment ran. The route was shown in pencil, but I explained that it was only tentative and might have to

be considerably modified as we went along.

"This part of India has only been mapped on a small scale," I explained. "We mustn't take too much notice of features shown on it, such as the course of nullahs and the approximate contours. I imagine they were only sketched in rough-hand after the main topographical features had been accurately sited."

Donovan examined the map with interest. I wondered whether he was examining it with an expert eye so that I could obtain a clue to his identity. He did indeed seem to pick up my instructions very quickly—and it is not everyone who can read a map at first sight with a full understanding of its intricacies.

"Can I have a copy of the map?" he asked.

"Of course. You will need one for your work."

"Thanks. I'm sorry if I am a bit slow in following you. Jungle-clearing, eh?"

"Yes. We shall give you the general line of the first tangent. Your gang will have to clear the jungle to a width of about twenty yards so as to give a clear sight for the theodolite."

Donovan looked at me with a puzzled air. "Could you put that into plain English?" he said. "I find these technicalities a bit confusing."

I made my meaning plainer and Donovan nodded his head, though I could have sworn that he understood my meaning first time. I tried him with further technical jargon. "I shall run a line from tangent point to tangent point first of all. Then I shall decide on the degree of curvature for the curves. You will have to bring your gang close in then and clear the way for the chainmen along each chord."

Donovan sighed and rolled up the map. "I dare say I shall pick it up as we go along," he remarked. "One step at a time, eh? When do I start?"

"To-morrow. I shall be out all to-day. To-morrow morning I will have a gang of coolies ready for you with

the proper tools. You can start right away. The line will lead straight towards the Nimli Hills. That is why I don't think much of the alignment. It may be shorter, but it will be much heavier work once you get involved with those rocky hills."

"Yes. Queer place, isn't it? "

"What? Among the Hills? "

"Yes."

"I have never been there yet. Do you know anything about the Nimli Hills?"

"Oh, well, I wandered about a bit before I came here, you know."

"I thought the Hills were quite uninhabited? They are too rocky and barren for agriculture, so I am told."

"Oh, yes. But there are people living there, you know."

There was not much more to discuss so a few minutes later I mounted the protesting Jabberwock and rode off, glad to get away at last. I ought to have been glowing with satisfaction at the thought of Donovan about to be settled in a decent job, but I was most emphatically not glowing. Instead I was cursing myself for an idiot and convinced that I had seen the last of the man who would assuredly disappear with my thirty rupees to which I could bid good-bye for ever. And yet—and yet—with an exclamation of impatience I put the man out of my thoughts and settled down to the jogtrot of the Jabberwock.

For the rest of the day I remained out and about along the line of the railway, settling a thousand and one petty disputes and difficulties, inspecting bridge foundations, cursing a slipshod contractor for using defective lime, and generally enjoying the interesting routine of work in the exhilarating air of a Rajputana winter. Some fifteen miles from headquarters I stopped under a spreading banyan tree for lunch. Boota Singh led the Jabberwock away to where some villagers were irrigat-

ing their fields with a runnel of water from a well, and the hairy beast obeyed injunctions from Boota Singh in the camel tongue to drink deep. This the huge creature did with many noisy gurgles and suckings until Boota Singh was satisfied. Then the Jabberwock was brought back and made to squat under the shade of the banyan tree. Boota Singh squatted too and regarded me with an ironical look. Not that he meant anything by his expression; it was the natural expression of his lined aristocratic features.

He was a handsome old boy with his grey beard parted in the middle and brushed outwards until it curled behind his ears. He dearly loved a gossip and he often told me news of our little community. I found his speech difficult to follow at first for he spoke a rough local dialect, but I soon got used to it. He was a Rajput although he followed the lowly calling of a camel man. But he was immensely proud of his caste and he was an accepted leader of the miscellaneous collection of peoples who dwelt around my bungalow. As often as not it was Boota Singh who led a deputation with some pathetically simple request for the betterment of their lot. He spoke on such occasions with a simple directness and with an exquisite courtesy while his wrinkled face lit up with a sunny smile. So I was not surprised when a deprecating cough announced that he had a communication to make.

"Well, Boota Singh, what is it now?"

"Nothing, Huzoor, nothing at all. A small matter."

"Your quarters need repairing? The roof leaks?"

"Nay, nay. That would indeed be a small matter which Mistri Har Narain would attend to without troubling the Huzoor." Was there a shade of an accent on the word Mistri?

"What then is this small matter of no account?"

"It is a question that all men are asking. A question to which I can give no answer. I am a poor man. How can I answer difficult questions?"

"Well?" I thought I knew what the question was. Why had I engaged the undesirable Donovan instead of a respectable Indian?

"We are ignorant men. We do not understand many things. We do not understand the Presence's country. Yet we have heard things said about it."

This was not what I had expected. I waited patiently for this roundabout approach to Boota Singh's question.

"We know," the old man went on, "that there are many Sahibs there. Some say there are only a few, but that is foolishness. Is that true talk?"

"Quite true. There are many crores though not so many as in India."

"But some say that there are many also who are not Sahibs. That is the question that all men are asking. Is it true that there are those in the Sahib's country who are not Sahibs?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so. It depends what you mean by a Sahib, Boota Singh."

"That is easily answered. I mean one who is in the service of the Government. One whose father and whose father's father was in the service of the Government. What else?"

"My father, Boota Singh, was not in the service of the Government."

He waved the difficulty aside. "Nevertheless the Sahib will have many sons and grandsons in honourable service. I will pray for the Huzoor to have many strong sons."

"Is your question answered?"

"Truly. I have been well answered." The old man allowed his gaze to wander away and he squatted in silence, waiting until I was ready to go. Of course I knew that his question was aimed at the Donovan affair, but I wondered what he had made of my answer to his awkward question and why he had been satisfied with my evasive reply. It was pleasant sitting in the shade

of the great tree with its immense spread of branches, for the sun was hot at noonday though the air was deliciously cool. I lingered as long as I could, sprawling easily on the soft-smelling earth while the Jabberwock rumbled and grumbled. The long line of the Nimli Hills, which ran parallel with the railway I was building, bounded my view. They were not very high, perhaps a thousand feet or so above the adjoining plains, but they were jagged and barren, thrusting rocky fingers up into the sky with many a grim precipice standing sheer above a mass of impenetrable jungle.

The sun went in and we both exclaimed at this unusual event. Once the rains ceased in the autumn an unbroken series of cloudless days were to be expected until the lesser winter rains came. It was early for them to come before Christmas, but the appearance of a single cloud no bigger than a man's hand was enough to announce the forerunner of the thunderstorms that would follow. Boota Singh suggested that we had better return.

"The camel cannot stand on wet ground," he explained. "It would be bad if the Huzoor had to walk many miles back to Camp."

"It won't rain to-day," I grumbled, but I took his advice. Soon we were jogging homeward with the Nimli Hills on our right flank. It looked as if my confident prophecy about the weather was very wrong, for a big purple cloud grew over the Hills and Boota Singh, sitting behind me on the double saddle, pointed with his long lean finger.

"Soon we shall know if Indra is pleased with the people."

"What do you mean, Boota Singh?"

"Sahib, if Indra speaks it will be a sign that he is pleased and that he will send rain."

"Do you mean if it thunders?"

"Truly. That is how Indra tells the people whether

he will send rain or not. If rain comes the people will be well-fed and contented. If not, they will go hungry because the spring crops will wither."

The purple cloud grew in depth and brooded low over the Hills, but no growl of thunder came from it. We trotted rapidly, for the Jabberwock was heading for home and his huge head bobbed ungainly with the jerking of his padded feet. I was pleasantly tired and I thought contentedly of the tea that awaited me amid comfortable surroundings. But Boota Singh did not feel happy.

"Sahib, Indra has not spoken."

"Wait. The storm may break with the setting of the sun."

"Nay. The clouds are disappearing. Indra is departing in displeasure."

It was true. The clouds were thinning out in the disconcerting manner that winter storms have. Just when you expect a terrific downpour the clouds evaporate tantalizingly and vanish with a useless puff of dusty wind, leaving nothing behind but a faint trace of offence in the air. This is what now happened. A moaning dusty wind sent irritating gusts of gritty air to fill the eyes and nostrils with annoyance, while the clouds themselves shredded out into nothingness. Then the wind subsided as rapidly as it had risen, leaving an uncanny stillness in the tainted air. In a depressed silence we arrived at the bungalow, and I twitched the nose rope of the Jabberwock, telling him to squat down.

"Zah! Zah!" which is camel language for 'sit down'.

The Jabberwock registered a formal protest on the general principle of objecting to everything he was asked to do. But after one or two outraged bellows he folded up like a foot-rule and Boota Singh and I dismounted. The old man looked lined and weary, with much dust clinging to his face. I expect I looked rather travel-worn too.

"Never mind, Boota Singh. Perhaps the rain will come to-morrow."

"Perhaps. And perhaps not."

"It is too early for the winter rains."

"That, too, is a bad sign. Indra has not spoken. That is what all men will be saying. He is angry with the people. Sahib, they will be asking why he is angry." He turned towards the Nimli Hills with a wondering look on his fine old face. "Indra walked among the Hills and yet he did not speak."

"Perhaps he saw something there at which he was displeased," I observed fatuously.

Boota Singh did not reply, but he turned a startled look upon me. For a moment he appeared to be about to say something. Then he jerked the unfortunate Jabberwock to his feet and led him away without a word. I turned away and entered the bungalow where Abdul greeted me while he continued to flick away a lot of dust that the boisterous wind had carried in from outside. From the vigour of the flicks I gathered that the old man was still feeling huffed about Donovan, and tea was served in a dignified silence. It was irritating that the peace of the evening should be disturbed by this air of constraint which seemed to be connected in some way with the minor annoyances of the dust storm, and the feeling endured until I went to bed.

I slept under a heap of bedclothes out in the open under the stars. I had made a concrete platform so as to raise the bed out of the dust away from the trains of ants and other more horrid insects that might be tempted to climb the legs of the bed. It was grand to lie staring up at where Arcturus wheeled and the planets blazed while sleep gradually came. When I first arrived I was a little nervous lest prowling beasts might prove dangerous. The country was full of panther and there were tigers in the Nimli Hills. But I soon learnt that they were not likely to be troublesome, though it was awe-

inspiring to hear them coughing round the Camp sometimes. So I slept peacefully in the still cold air of the winter and woke refreshed at dawn, wakened by the genial warmth of the sun even before Abdul brought me a steaming cup of tea with hot buttered toast and some fruit—the 'little breakfast' of the East.

But next morning I found that the unease of the day before had invaded my rest, and I woke with a ruffled disposition and I crawled unwillingly out of the wrong side of the bed. However, there was no real reason for my crankiness, for I soon heard that Donovan had started out on his job with the gang of coolies that had been told off for him. I left him to carry on and spent the day elsewhere so that something of my discomfort was abated by the time that the evening came. In fact I found a more contented Camp when I returned and Abdul did not adopt quite such a ruffled air. Something, too, of the normal peace and order of the Camp returned and I began to hope that the affair of Donovan was blowing over. I did not see the man anywhere about.

Two or three days passed like this and I breathed more freely. I kept away deliberately from the new alignment that Donovan was working on, but my survey party reported that they had run the new line close to the Hills and it was necessary for me to give the precise instructions regarding further progress. So I decided to ride out the next day and see how matters were getting on.

As the distance was short I took my pony, a sturdy little country-bred creature made of whipcord and with a mouth like a deal board. It was mustard yellow in colour and its ears curled inwards, showing a trace of Marwari blood, but it could tire me out long before it showed signs of weariness—and this, though my long legs dangled down absurdly on both sides as if my weight must assuredly crush the little beast to earth. We scampered off along the new alignment which was easily

visible on the ground, not only because Donovan's gang had cleared the scrub but also because the survey party had left a neat line of wooden pegs every hundred feet in a perfect straight line laid with the mathematical precision of a theodolite.

It was only three miles or so to where the new alignment began to feel the upward surge of the Nimli Hills. The range burst up from the surrounding plain with the disconcerting suddenness of Rajputana, where the topography looks as if an immense region of rocky hills had been filled up by Titans with a mass of earth, leaving only the tops of the hills protruding. They have the look of islands in a sea of soil. Indeed, the smaller ones look like ships floating on a calm sea stretching away to the far horizon. The Nimli Hills were no exception to this strange illusion, though they were big enough to resemble a long narrow land which must somehow be utterly different from the surrounding flat region. The railway I was building dodged in and out of the seeming islands with their spiny ridges of hard rock so as to avoid the heavy work of tunnelling and blasting that would be needed once the line got involved in hilly country. My vexation at having to waste time, as I thought, trying to find a short cut through the hills can be well understood. Now that I was close to the Nimli Hills I could see no reason to change my views.

I found Sohan Lal, the Supervisor I had put in charge of the survey, waiting for me at the end of the line of pegs. He showed me a longitudinal section of the line as far as he had advanced, which he had plotted on squared paper. It showed a steady rise of gradient towards the Hills as would be expected, but he was now in need of a decision as to further advance.

"It will be slower work from now onwards, Sahib. It has been easy going so far. But now we have reached thick jungle as you can see and I shall only be able to take very short shots with the instruments."

"Of course. It cannot be helped. You will be delayed by the need for jungle-cutting. Where is Donovan Sahib and his gang?"

"On ahead. I told him to wait for orders as to which way you would direct the line to be taken. But he would not listen to my instructions. He said he knew quite well which way to go."

"Did he? How did he know that?"

"Perhaps the Sahib has already told him?" There was a faint tinge of reproach in Sohan Lal's words, as though I had been guilty of slighting him by giving direct orders to a Mistri instead of having transmitted instructions through the proper channel.

"Of course I didn't, Sohan Lal. Is it likely that I should do such a thing? Everything must be done decently and in proper order."

Sohan Lal flashed a smile at this. "The Sahib knows the old customs, and old customs are good customs. Nevertheless men are saying . . ."

"Well, Sohan Lal, what are men saying?"

"They say that the Sahib may be ready to give ear to one of his own blood."

"Nonsense. I have not seen the man since he started work."

"Very good talk! I will explain to the men."

"That is why I have come to-day. To consult with you and to give orders to Donovan Sahib."

Sohan Lal again flashed approval of my words. We spent some time over the map, and Sohan Lal produced the record of some spot levels he had taken to help us to decide on the next step forward. It was a bit of a problem, for in a more settled district I should have had properly contoured maps to lay down a line upon. But here the contours were unreliable and a good deal depended on an eye for the nature of the country. Sohan Lal gave sage counsel and suggested one or two alternatives to be explored before we came to a final

decision. I agreed with his suggestions based on years of experience, and then said I would ride forward and tell Donovan where to clear the tangled growth of stunted trees and undergrowth.

"Sir, I do not know which way he has gone. When I spoke to him he told me to mind my own business."

"All right, Sohan Lal, I will explain to him that he must work with you without friction. Otherwise he will have to be dismissed."

"Very good talk!" agreed Sohan Lal with hearty approval.

I left him and rode along a track left by Donovan's gang. They had cut a broad swathe through the jungle, and curiously enough it was correctly along one of the routes I had just selected for exploration. It looked as if Donovan also had an eye for country, though there was no great mystery about it. The route lay towards a cleft in a rocky ridge, and it was simply common sense to try a way through the cleft. I rode about a mile along the cleared swathe and then the whole thing petered out. There was no sign of Donovan or his gang and I could hear no sound of men at work. It was rather mystifying, as though the jungle had swallowed them up. In fact the dead silence of the jungle was strangely disturbing. At this midday hour there was no sound at all. There was no wind to make a rustle of leaves even.

And then I noticed that there was a narrow track leading off from the end of the cleared strip. I dismounted and explored it for a short way, but soon found that it was too rough to ride along. But it was the only way possible for Donovan and his gang to have disappeared. There was no sense in following him any farther, for the path led in the wrong direction. So I made up my mind to return to Camp and see Donovan later when he got back. I was just about to mount when I heard a confused noise as of many men shouting, and before I had time to do more than wonder at this brusque dis-

turbance of the silence a number of men came running down the path. I could hear Donovan cursing and shouting, but the babel of noise from the men drowned everything. They saw me and surrounded me, all talking at once, and it was plain that they were frightened and angry. I tried to distinguish what they were shouting, but it was hopeless. And while I was vainly trying to still the tumult Donovan emerged from the pathway, his face flushed with anger. At the sight of him the men ceased their clamour, but they still pressed round me as though to seek my protection.

Donovan stopped dead at the sight of me. He was looking far less of a scarecrow than when I had seen him last. He had acquired some white drill clothes and a Terai hat and he carried a formidable stick. He was clean-shaven and his hair had been trimmed. The whole effect was a tremendous improvement in his appearance. The down-and-out had gone, but with the disappearance of that which was pitiful there remained something which was indefinably unpleasant. I am afraid I regarded him with a confirmed disavour. To put it bluntly, I did not like the look of the man at all. However, he greeted me civilly enough.

"Good morning, Sir."

"Good morning, Donovan. What's the trouble?"

"No trouble at all. It's these damned coolies. They won't do what they are told. They take a bit of driving."

"What is all this noise about?" I said to the men in Hindustani. "The Sahib says that you will not do what he orders."

There was no response but a sullen shifting among the men pressing round me. I did not quite like the look of them. The simple cultivators who worked as coolies on the line were normally a cheerful, kindly people, ready at all times with a jest. But now they were in no mood for jesting, and Donovan looked at them with an unfriendly eye.

"I had better engage more reliable men," Donovan said truculently. "These fellows are no good."

"What's the matter with them?"

"Unreliable, that's what they are." Donovan stuck out his weak chin obstinately.

"They seem to have done their job so far all right."

"Yes, so far. That's right. Where it was easy going. But directly we got to the Hills they started giving trouble. And when I took them along that path they went on strike."

"Well, why did you go along that path? It is out of the way altogether. And Sohan Lal tells me you took it upon yourself to choose the line of jungle-cutting."

"I know what I am doing," said Donovan, with a shifty eye slewing round the horizon. I am bound to say that it was a clearer eye than before and that it looked as if the man was avoiding drink. In fact he looked very much healthier in every way.

"I dare say you do. And I admit that the line you have selected is not far wrong. But you can't go off into the blue on your own. I will give you precise instructions through Sohan Lal."

"I know what I am doing," grumbled Donovan sulkily.

"I'm not so sure. Why did you take your gang up that path?"

"Just to have a look round. To prospect the next step forward, if you like. Common sense, if you don't like it."

"Now look here, there is no sense, common or otherwise, in being impertinent to me and I won't have it. You had better get on with the job you have been given. You can continue at present along the line leading to that cleft in the ridge that is plainly visible over there."

"All right. But I shall have to engage some other men. These men are no good."

"Nonsense!"

"It isn't nonsense. Ask them yourself if they are willing to go on working here."

"Very well, I will."

Somewhat to my astonishment there was a chorus of refusal when I put the matter to them. With one accord they said they would not work any longer under Donovan. They did not exactly put it as crudely as that, but one of them who acted as spokesman used many polite circumlocutions which amounted to the same thing.

"Sahib, we are poor men," was the burden of his speech. "We do not like the Hills. We are cultivators of fields. That is work which we understand. But there are wild animals in these Hills. We do not wish to die. We are poor men."

And so it went on with the same protestations in many different forms always coming round to the point that they did not want to work in the Hills.

"Not only wild animals, Sahib, but demons also . . ."

"It's a simple matter, really," said Donovan. "I can recruit men from among the Hills. They won't mind working here."

"There aren't any villages among the Hills," I said.

"Oh, yes, there are. Ask them. Not many, but I can get enough men all right."

To my question there was a ready response. Most certainly there were men living among the Hills. Wild men like the wild animals. Men who did not fear the demons because they were related to them. It all sounded a little absurd, but it was a simple way out of the difficulty that had arisen and I agreed to Donovan recruiting a gang from the hillmen. This decision was greeted with a shout of approval from the coolies, and they made no trouble about continuing to work for the rest of the day on the understanding that they would be paid off that evening.

Donovan accepted the decision with undisguised triumph. I must say that I found his increasingly

truculent manner much more unpleasant than his first abject abasement. He received my orders to apply to Sohan Lal for further instructions with a condescending air which made me furious. I cut matters short and mounted my pony to depart. The pony was restive and Donovan held him while I mounted, and I noticed that he knew the proper way to hold a horse. I bade him a curt good-bye and I was actually turning away to trot off when two men emerged from the path, two white men.

There was an exclamation from Donovan, but before he could speak the two men advanced towards me with outstretched hands. I was so taken aback by this unexpected sight that I must have stared rudely at them. Automatically I put out my hand and it was grasped by the taller of the two men.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Vallender. My name is Potts, Ephraim Potts. This is Mr. Winger, John P. Winger, you may have heard of him."

Still in astonished silence I shook hands solemnly with the two Americans, for such their speech proclaimed them.

CHAPTER THREE

I RECOVERED from my astonishment at the sight of two white men where I thought that Donovan and I were the only Europeans for miles around. But something of my astonishment must have been plain to be seen, for Potts spoke again with great geniality.

"I expect you are surprised to see us, eh, Mr. Vallerder? Our fault entirely. I said to John P. again and again that we ought to have written you. Didn't I, John?"

"That's so," replied the other with an air of great solemnity.

"But there it is. We didn't." He laughed loudly, disclosing a perfect set of dentures. "If only we all did what we ought, it would be a much better world."

"But how did you know my name?" I asked.

"We heard about you in Gwalior. The engineer in charge of the State railway told us about you. Yes, Sir, and he said you were a mighty fine engineer yourself. I must say I hand it to you Britishers for what you have done in India."

The mystery began to clear somewhat. Gwalior was the State adjoining Sanganir and it lay some fifty miles away beyond the Nimli Hills. So they must have trekked from Gwalior City for some reason. Potts soon satisfied my natural curiosity on this point.

"John P. and I are from the States. . . ."

"So I had guessed," I put in with a chuckle.

"Did you now? Well, maybe we are representative citizens right enough. No harm in that, eh?" Ephraim Potts grinned amiably. "But I had better tell you all

about us, otherwise you will be sending for the police or something. We are from Williamsville University, Williamsville, Indiana. It's a grand city, Mr. Vallender, and a grand college. Not as fine as your Oxford College, maybe, but a remarkable institution. Yes, Sir, and John P. Winger is Deputy Sub-Dean of the University."

"That's so," observed that gentleman.

"Well," I said, "I'm glad to see you. You must come to my Camp and have a meal and a drink. I don't know how you are fixed up, but I can put you up if you like. It is a real pleasure to see a white man . . ." I ran on hospitably in this wise and the two Americans made hearty response—at least Ephraim Potts did. The other one was evidently a quieter sort, but he smiled and said "That's so," or words to that effect, at intervals.

"We'll come with pleasure, Mr. Vallender, some time. We have a camp of our own and it will be a duty and a pleasure to entertain you there. But we aren't properly fixed up yet—not shaken down yet, you see. So we'll be getting along back to see to things. Later on I hope we shall see more of one another."

"Are you camping in the Hills?" I asked with my astonishment returning. "Are you staying for some time, I mean? I don't want to pry into your affairs of course, but . . ."

"A very natural question," laughed Potts with great *bonhomie*. "Of course you want to know how long we shall be here. Well, that's just it. We don't know ourselves. But we shall be here some time, I expect."

"In the Hills? It's not a very—well, a very healthy place. You would do better to camp out in the plain, where there is plenty of water and so on. I could help you with any labour you want to make your camping site comfortable."

"That's mighty kind of you. But I think we'll stay in the Hills. It will be handier for our work."

I had momentarily forgotten about Donovan, but now

I remembered him and I looked round to call to him to join us. Although I had relegated him to the humble position of a Mistri, I could not ignore him when there were other white men about. Besides, it would be ridiculous to ask the Americans to join in the rigid class distinction that I had to observe among my own staff. They would not understand the age-old aristocratic prejudices of the Hindus and Mohammedans and Sikhs who took such a pride in their position in life. So I quickly made up my mind to represent Donovan as a sort of foreman. But the man had disappeared. Neither he nor his gang were anywhere to be seen. They had melted into the jungle and so relieved me of a slight embarrassment, though I was rather disconcerted at the suddenness of his departure. Potts was still chatting away and I managed to take in what he was saying even while I peered round to see if Donovan was anywhere about. It seemed that the two Americans from Indiana were on a sort of expedition from the University of Williamsville.

"John P. is the famous naturalist. I expect you have heard of him?"

"Well—er—it's hardly my line of country, you know."

"Sure, sure. You are a famous engineer. I was forgetting. You wouldn't know anything about a bug-hunter. D'you hear that, John? He's never heard of you. That will take you down a peg or two, eh?"

"Is your line entomology, Mr. Winger?"

"That's right," agreed Winger with a slight frown.

"I'm the organizer of the expedition and I don't mind telling you that I take no interest in bugs. None at all. Except to squash them when I see them." The jovial laugh of Potts was much in evidence and I found it to be very infectious. Potts kept up a continual rattle of conversation with his genial, plump face creasing always into an expression of the utmost good nature,

while Winger chipped in now and again with a dry comment.

"But," I managed to edge in, "you have come at the wrong time of the year. The best time for camping but not for insects. You ought to be here at the break of the rains. It is then that all sorts of horrors come creeping out of holes in the ground."

"Do you hear that? Wasting our time, John P. That's what I've always said. Wasting our time chasing around after a lot of creepers. That's what Mr. Vallender thinks."

I hurriedly disclaimed this, but Potts was insistent. "And quite right too, if we were after ordinary creepers. But we aren't. No, Sir."

"We most certainly are not," affirmed John P. Winger.

I did not quite know what to make of this cryptic statement, so I refrained from comment. I repeated my invitation and offer of assistance, and they said they would come and see me at my Camp at the earliest possible time.

"We take it as very friendly of you, very friendly indeed, Mr. Vallender. But we are pretty busy men and so are you. We'll meet again, but for the present . . ."

"Look here," I said, "I wish you wouldn't call me Mr. Vallender. It is much too formal. Let's get on to an easier footing right away."

"Sure, sure!" cried Ephraim Potts jovially. "Do you hear that, John P.? Mr. Vallender isn't one of those high-hat haw-haw Englishmen that hold you at arm's length. Shorty is what I'm called by my friends. Why? Because I'm so long. Ha! Ha! Ha! And you can call him John P., like I do, or else John for short. And we'll call you Peter. Is that O.K.?"

"Of course," I answered, wondering how they knew my name was Peter. The engineer of the Gwalior State railway might have told them, but . . .

"That's fine, fine. Now we must be getting along. I'm glad we met you. We couldn't have timed it better if we had known you were coming here this morning."

There was a sudden exclamation from Winger—well, hardly that, but a sort of noise as if he was trying to stop his talkative friend from running on quite so fast. Ephraim Potts stopped abruptly and his face fell ludicrously.

"All right, all right," he grumbled with an attempt to give a facetious twist to his words. "Always do talk too much. That's what John P. always says. He means we really must be getting back to our camp, Peter. So good-bye and good luck till we meet again."

"Good-bye, Shorty. So-long, John," I made my words sound as hearty as I could and the two men disappeared into the narrow pathway, and Shorty's voice diminished as they increased their distance from me. There was one brief interruption to his stream of talk. It was an explosive remark by the shorter man. "Damned idiot!" The words came to me very clearly, and then there was an almost inaudible expostulation by Potts which ceased quickly either because they were now too far away to be heard or because that loquacious individual had been silenced at last.

I made a slight attempt to find Donovan, but he was nowhere about. So I mounted the little country-bred and scampered back to Camp, where I intended to spend an afternoon coping with some arrears of correspondence about which Chota Lal was getting restive. But I found my head full of speculations about the two Americans who had come so surprisingly into my life. I was very glad to see their white faces, and it was a pleasure to be able to talk my own tongue again. Donovan hardly counted since he could be no companion to me, but it looked as if I should be able to enjoy the society of Potts and Winger from time to time. In fact

I had a great idea about this at once, for a letter had arrived that morning from my next-door neighbour, fifty miles away, who had some weeks ago invited me to go over there and stay for a few days at Christmas. But now he had written that his wife was ill and that he would himself be going away so that the party was off. The result was that I should have to spend a solitary Christmas unless—and this was my grand idea—I invited Potts and Winger to come and stay a day or two and eat their Christmas dinner with me.

Full of my idea I sat down to write a note to them. I hesitated as to which one I should write to. Potts had done all the talking, but it looked as if Winger was the real leader of the expedition. Deputy Sub-Dean of the University—that was what Potts had called him. In my ignorance of the organization of American universities I did not know whether this indicated that Winger was an important person or not. And that set me off wondering about the bug-hunting expedition. I had a vague idea that some American colleges were odd institutions, so that the dispatch of an expedition to India to collect rare insects did not seem altogether absurd. And yet there was something absurd about the two men.

For one thing their clothes were all wrong. They were dressed like explorers in a Hollywood film with ridiculous clumping top boots laced up the front, and they wore curious coloured shirts and most lamentable solar topees, the wrong shape and having no regard to the prevailing fashion. It looked as if they were completely ignorant of the country and had been rigged out by a firm as ignorant as themselves. The whole effect of their appearance was to make me inclined to laugh at them with their odd clothes, American speech, and their solemn way of speaking of Williamsville University—or was it College?—as though it was an important centre of learning. I am afraid I erred in laughing at

them from a sense of insular prejudice. For if only I had known how formidable a pair they were I should have been filled with a lively concern instead of patronizing ridicule.

However, at that time I had no inkling of what was in store, so I gave my hospitable intentions full rein. I wrote a cordial note to John P. Winger and called for Boota Singh to take it. But the old Rajput was nowhere about, although the Jabberwock was browsing happily on the thorny branches of a clump of scrubby trees a few hundred yards from the Camp. The huge beast had been hobbled by tying up one of its forelegs so that it could only move by lolloping awkwardly with the other unimpeded foreleg. Usually Boota Singh was to be seen watching over his charge, but now just when I wanted him he was not to be found and no one knew where he had gone.

I told Abdul to get a coolie for me who would take the note to the camp of the Americans. I assumed that everyone would know where it was since the advent of two white men would soon be bruited around. But I was surprised to find that Abdul knew nothing of them. I asked why he had not told me the news of two Sahibs arriving in the neighbourhood, but it was clear that he had heard nothing about them. I thought at first that he might have some reason for feigning ignorance in the secretive way that Indians sometimes have. But I was soon convinced that his surprise was genuine. He bustled off to get a man to act as messenger.

It was some time before he returned with an unwilling, sullen villager who hung back in spite of Abdul's tart instructions to take the letter.

"I will not go," grumbled the man.

"What talk is this?" snapped Abdul. "It is the Sahib's order."

"I am sick."

"Sahib, he is not sick."

"Better get another man, Abdul."

"It will be the same if I do. He will say he is sick also."

"Have I leave to go to my work?" asked the man.

"If you are sick, you cannot work," I said. "Would you like a quinine pill?"

"If it is the Sahib's order I will take quinine, but I will not take the letter," the coolie muttered obstinately.

"Why not?"

"Sahib, I am a poor man. I do not wish to die."

And so it went on. The man made all sorts of excuses about the Hills being full of wild animals, which was true enough. He even said that all men knew that the Hills were an evil place and that anyone who went into them died of fever. When I scouted this he fell back on the excuse that the Hills were the abode of demons. In fact nothing I could say would induce him to take the letter. It was quite plain that he was in the same state of superstitious dread of something in the Hills as Donovan's gang of men. It was very exasperating, but I knew the uselessness of trying to ride roughshod over a local prejudice in the simple minds of the villagers. The man was told to get back to his work, and he departed with a relieved grin, showing no sign of the sickness of which he had complained.

After lunch I went to the office and sent for Chota Lal. In a few minutes he appeared with a chaprassi carrying a pile of papers at the sight of which I groaned, for I knew that these were the arrears which I had been neglecting. However, with Chota Lal's expert assistance the pile rapidly diminished and at last the chaprassi was able to remove them. I sat back with a sigh of relief for I hate office work. I know it has to be done and that proper organization is impossible without it, but it is always a delight to me to leave the office behind and ride out on to the job where I can deal direct with my able staff of Supervisors and Overseers and Mistries. How-

ever, the afternoon was too far gone when we had disposed of the mass of papers to make it worth while to go out along the line. It was nearly midwinter and the sun had already taken on an amber tinge as it sloped down towards the west. So I leant back in my chair and prepared for a gossip with Chota Lal.

This hour of gossip was a pleasant custom that had grown up between us. It often happened that the grey-haired head clerk sent the chaprassi away with the last of the day's documents duly signed and then lingered instead of following him. This was a sign that he had some news to impart, and I now recognized the symptoms.

"Well, Chota Lal, what is the news to-day?"

"Sir, it is good news. It will be of much help. As you know there are many troublesome cases regarding land acquisition."

"Yes, but what is the news?"

"Sir, it is about that thing. The State has appointed a Motamid."

"What is a Motamid?"

Chota Lal searched round for a translation of the Arabic word, and for a moment his excellent knowledge of English was at fault. "Sir, a Motamid is one who goes between. He has been appointed by the Maharajah of Sanganir to give help between the Railway and the State Officials."

"Oh, I see. A sort of liaison officer between me and the Sanganir State officials."

I had to explain the word 'liaison' to Chota Lal, and he added it to his vocabulary with much satisfaction.

"A French word? But is there not an English word also?"

"Well, a go-between is good English. But it is scarcely a respectable word, and it will not do to give any disrespect to the new Motamid. What is his name?"

"I do not know. But it will be correct to address

him as Motamid Sahib. It is a very honourable title like an ambassador."

"Very well, we will call him Motamid Sahib. When will he come to see me?"

"Sir, whenever you order. It will be his duty to come when you send for him to settle some difficult matter. There is that troublesome business with the brick kiln at Kanchrapur. Perhaps he will be able to dispose of it."

"A good idea. Please send him my salaams. Perhaps it would be courteous to receive him at my bungalow in the evening. Would he take tea with me?"

"Oh no, Sir." Chota Lal was mildly shocked. He was himself a Brahmin of very good family and he would view with horror the idea of taking any food or drink in company with a European. "This is a very strong Hindu State, Sir. His Highness the Maharajah is very strict. He would not be pleased if his officials infringed caste rules."

"Very well then. Send him my salaams, and say I should be pleased to see him after tea to-morrow. About five o'clock? Will that give him time to get back to Barwara City before dark?"

Chota Lal smiled. "Sir, that will be very suitable. The Motamid will bring an escort with him. He will not be afraid of being out after dark like a common man. He will have men with lanterns."

And so it was settled, but something Chota Lal had said reminded me of the difficulty of getting a man to go to the Americans' Camp in the Nimli Hills. "By the way, there seem to be some queer ideas among the villagers about the Nimli Hills. Have you heard that two Americans have camped there? I wanted to send a note to them asking them to stay with me for a few days at Christmas. But the villagers say that they are afraid to go into the Hills."

Chota Lal shuffled his feet in an embarrassed manner.

"I have heard that two Europeans had come. But I did not know that they were American. Are they your friends?"

"No, no. I only met them by accident to-day while I was talking to Donovan Sahib."

"Are they friends of Mister Donovan?" Chota Lal's use of the word Mister did not escape me. He would not refer to him as Donovan Sahib. A subtle difference which both of us understood quite well.

"No, they are newly come to India from America. How can I get a man who will take the letter? I don't want to force any man to go against his will."

"It will be better to employ a man who lives in the Nimli Hills. They are wild people, almost savages, but one of them would obey an order."

"Oh, come now, Chota Lal. Savages? There are no savages in India."

"Sir, there are evil men in the Nimli Hills. The villagers are much afraid of them. I am a Brahmin and know what I say. Better have nothing to do with them."

"I'm afraid that can't be helped. The re-alignment runs through the Hills. If the Chief Engineer decides that the line must go that way, there will have to be many men working there."

"Sir, it will be a great misfortune if he decides that."

"Well, he has not decided it yet. I don't think he will. It is not a good route, although it looks attractive on paper. But will you please get a man who will take a note to the Americans' Camp."

"Very good, Sir. I will tell Mister Donovan to send a man with it. Please to give me the letter."

"Yes, that is a good idea. And that reminds me. Mr. Donovan told me that he was engaging a gang of hill men to work with him. You had better give him a muster sheet to fill in with their names and rates of pay. He can send one of his men with the letter."

I was mildly annoyed at the heavy weather everyone seemed to be making about the letter. I was so accustomed to sending off a man with a message without thinking twice about the matter that the bother I was having about communicating with John P. Winger and Ephraim Potts irritated me slightly.

"On second thoughts, Chota Lal, I will give the letter to Mr. Donovan myself."

"That will be more better, Sir." This little lapse from perfect English was a sign of great satisfaction on the part of the head clerk. If he did not altogether approve of something he responded with a formal "Very good, Sir." But if he strongly approved, a sonorous "That will be more better" greeted my decision. So I bade him good evening and returned to my bungalow for tea.

That evening I was on the point of sending for Donovan when Abdul announced that he was waiting outside. "Mistri Donovan has come."

I noted the way he referred to Donovan and the resolute manner in which all my staff refused to concede him the title of Sahib. In fact I soon learnt that they had compromised between the English word Mister and the Hindustani word Mistri. It was a useful way of evading the difficulty of alluding to him, and they used various forms of the word. Sometimes it was 'Mish-ter', and again 'Mishtri', or other slight variant. But in the end everyone called him just Mistri Donovan.

Thus my pertinacious staff had their way in the end, as they usually did when it was a question of putting a man in his place. I ought to have been warned by their persistent hostility to the man, but at that time I had not yet realized the danger into which I was running, and I was still obsessed by the philanthropic notion of giving Donovan a chance of running straight. Looking back, I have often tried to assess the point at which I first sensed a feeling of alarm, and I am inclined

to think that it was at the interview with Donovan which I am about to describe.

I was sitting on the verandah, and I told the unwilling Abdul to bring another chair. Donovan slipped out of the gathering dusk and sat down. I bade him good evening, and he responded sulkily. I asked him what he wanted to see me about. "Though, mind you, you ought to have come to the office. However, if it's a private matter we may as well talk about it here."

"It is a private matter I want to see you about. I don't want anybody overhearing who understands English."

"All right. You can speak freely here. None of the servants understands English."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. But I had better dispose of my own business first. I want you to send one of your hill men with this letter to the Americans' Camp. Please send it off first thing to-morrow morning."

Donovan took it slowly and unwillingly. "All right. I suppose you wouldn't care to tell me what is in it?"

"It is an invitation to come and stay a few days with me next week, over Christmas Day." I decided to overlook Donovan's suspicious inquiry, though it was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to mind his own business. Donovan received my reply in silence and it appeared that he was turning it over in his mind. His shifty eye slewed this way and that in a most unprepossessing fashion, and my dislike of the man increased. He was so obviously the type whom one would not trust with sixpence that I am afraid that I regarded him with open disfavour, and I was about to ask again, curtly, why he had come to see me when he suddenly spoke—spoke hurriedly and furtively in an undertone.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. Here, take the chit back. Tear it up."

"You had better mind your own business, Donovan."

"That's just it. Who are these Americans? What do you know about them? Where do they come from?" He spoke with such seriousness that my wrath abated.

"Their names are Ephraim Potts and John P. Winger. They come from Williamsville University in the States."

"Oh! Williamsville, eh? What do you know about it?"

"Nothing. What does it matter? I suppose it's one of those queer American Colleges you see on the films. Winger is Deputy Sub-Dean or something. He is an entomologist."

Donovan laughed contemptuously and then turned serious again. "You don't know a thing about them."

"Of course not. I hope I shall get to know them better as time goes on. I gathered that they were staying round about here for some time. Now will you please tell me why you wanted to see me?"

"About the Americans. You had a long talk with them. I want to know what they told you about me." Donovan fixed me with his pale watery eye in an attempted expression of firm defiance. But he could not keep it up and his eye soon slid away from my look of blank astonishment.

"About you? Nothing at all. They did not mention you at all. Neither did I for that matter. Look here, Donovan, I don't like mysteries. I have avoided asking you about yourself but I shall be unable to go on like that if you start prying into my affairs. What do you know about Potts and the other fellow, what's his name?"

"Nothing. Never seen them in my life. I swear it." He said this with such immense fervour that I felt sure he was lying.

"Then why did you tell me not to invite them to stay with me?"

"I don't know." His tone was sulky, with an air of

injured innocence. "Trying to do you a good turn, that's all. But you don't believe it. Of course not. But it's God's truth."

"Are you sure you have never seen them before?"

"No! Never!"

"You didn't see them to-day, I suppose? You came down the same path as they did and only a short time before them. Where does that path go? You are behaving a bit oddly, you know. Why not tell me the truth?"

"I've told you the truth."

"All right. Have it your own way. But they must have seen you this morning. You were still with me when they suddenly appeared. They may have seen you somewhere along that path through the jungle."

"I tell you they didn't. I took jolly good care . . ."

"You saw them coming and hurriedly turned back. Is that it?"

But Donovan turned sulky again and only gave evasive answers to my questions. I could not make up my mind whether he really knew nothing about the two men or whether he knew a great deal too much. He shifted his ground and lied so obviously that I gave it up in the end. Once or twice I thought he was on the point of saying something more informative than his ridiculous quibbles, but either I was mistaken or else he could not bring himself to the point. However, he returned to the attempt to make me give up my plan of asking the Americans to stay with me.

"I can see you don't believe a word of what I am saying. But you might use a bit of common sense. You know nothing of these men and neither do I. Why ask them here? You would not do such a thing in England to two complete strangers—and Americans at that. Better tear up your chit . . ."

He rambled on like this for some time till I told him that I had made up my mind to do what seemed to me to be the right thing. It was ridiculous to be stand-

offish out here in the jungle with two white men just because I did not know them. It would be behaving like the stock joke about Englishmen—not speaking to a man in the jungle because he had not been properly introduced. I tried to make Donovan see the idiocy of such behaviour, but he stuck to his point with weak obstinacy. This made me all the more determined not to give way, and so he went off at last with my letter in his pocket saying that he would have the letter delivered, though I strongly suspected that he might simply throw it away, so insistent had he been about not inviting the Americans.

This talk with Donovan left me rather ruffled at first, but my feeling of annoyance soon gave way to one of uneasiness. As I have already said it was then that I first sensed something more seriously wrong than I had imagined. It was no longer a mere matter of having injudiciously employed an undesirable to whom the whole of my staff had the strongest objection. I began to connect Donovan with Potts and his taciturn friend. The derelict's continual denials of any knowledge of the men were unconvincing, and I assumed that he had some inkling of who they were or else that Donovan was afraid that they would disclose something about him that he wanted kept secret. A number of hypotheses occurred to me, none of which was right as it happened, but not one of them was at all satisfying. The most likely one was that the Americans were connected with the police and wanted Donovan for a crime committed in America; but it really seemed rather a silly idea and I put it from me.

I have often wondered whether I was stupid in not realizing earlier that I was up against something serious. But I don't think I need worry too much about that. I was busy building a railway, and any thought of criminal activities out in the jungle never occurred to me even after I had had suspicions aroused by Donovan's clumsy

evasions. Of course, I ought to have got rid of Donovan, but it would not have made any difference—no real difference—to what happened. I doubt whether it was an essential part of their plan to have Donovan employed by me, though it must have astonished him when I did actually give him a job.

I soon learnt that Donovan did send my letter which was addressed to Ephraim Potts. A cordial reply came the next day accepting my invitation, and its terms made me forget some of my suspicions. It was a Saturday when the reply came and Christmas Day was on the following Thursday. My two guests were to arrive on Christmas Eve, Wednesday. I gave the necessary orders to Abdul and then tried to dismiss the whole affair from my mind. There was a good deal to be done in order that I could count on a few days holiday so that I was kept hard at it, as also were the Jabberwock and the little country-bred pony.

But the atmosphere of tension did not relax as I hoped it would. There was something in the air, something brewing, that I could not define or lay my finger upon. Everyone went about his work apparently as usual, but there was an air of constraint that I did not like in all my dealings with my staff. The nearest I could get to a definition was that it looked as if everyone treated me with a slight hint of reproach as though I had done something which had disillusioned them. The comfortable feeling as though of a happy family that I like to engender in my staff was chilled by their demeanour. I tried direct questioning of Chota Lal or Boota Singh, but, of course, this was no use at all. Chota Lal was polite and non-committal, while Boota Singh agreed that all was not well, but explained it by saying that Indra had turned his face away from the people. And he said it, confound him, with that faint inflexion of reproach as though it was I who had offended Indra. I tried to laugh the old man out of his lugubrious mood and his

handsome face creased in a thousand tiny wrinkles as he smiled in response to my chaff. But he ended as he had begun by shaking his head unhappily.

"It is bad, Sahib, very bad. Indra will give a sign. After that he will speak. Then good fortune will return, but not till then."

I did not like to hear the old boy talking like that. It is always bad when superstition is mixed up with a job of work. It leads to all manner of trouble. One has to be very careful not to interfere with the religious susceptibilities of the Hindus and Mohammedans on one's staff—and quite rightly so. It is none of our business and Indians appreciate highly the way in which the English refrain from causing trouble by ignorantly treading on their toes. But now and again one gets involved in some such matter and then there is usually the devil to pay. It looked as if something was boiling up now, but I could not see how or why. The employment of Donovan had nothing to do with religion, though it had undoubtedly offended against my staff's sense of propriety.

It was in the evening of Saturday that I had asked the Motamid to come and see me. So after tea I had chairs set out on the concrete platform where later my bed for the night would be set and I awaited him with some curiosity. I had, of course, met a good many of the State officials about such matters as the supply of wood fuel and boundary limitations and so forth. They were a most charming set of men, for there are few people so attractive as the Rajputs of Rajputana. Their courtly manners and their handsome appearance are a source of great pleasure, though I sometimes wished that I could penetrate below the armour of exquisite courtesy with which they surround themselves. It is very delightful, but it makes intercourse rather formal although very friendly. So I was prepared for a stiff first interview with the Motamid.

He came in a two-wheeled vehicle drawn by white bullocks trotting briskly over the dusty plain that separated my Camp from Barwara City, and he had an escort of six men who jogged along after him carrying matchlock muskets. He halted at a discreet distance enjoined by good manners and his retainers fell in behind him. Then he marched towards where I was waiting for him. We exchanged salaams and uttered the prescribed words of greeting. He was a tallish man for a Rajput. They are usually of slight build, but the Motamid was bigger than usual, though not up to my six feet, in spite of his turban.

The formal greetings over, he dismissed his escort and I invited him to sit down. To my surprise he answered in excellent English.

"Thanks very much, Mr. Vallender. Shall we drop all ceremony now? I am sure you would like me to."

He laughed at my expression of astonishment while I hospitably fussed round and made suitable reply.

"I thought you would be surprised, especially after my impressive approach with an escort of—what do you call them?—catchemaliveohs, isn't it? They are rather mediæval, I must admit. And their muskets would be far more dangerous to themselves if ever they fired them. But don't worry, Mr. Vallender, they are only for show."

"What really astonishes me, Motamid Sahib, is your excellent English."

"Oh, there is no mystery about that. There is a very good Mission school at Sanganir. His Highness likes us to go to it for a few years. I was an apt pupil, that is all."

"But—er—I thought His Highness was a very strict Hindu? A Mission school would—er—hardly . . ."

"Why not? His Highness is no bigot. Hinduism does not prevent a man from taking advantage of the better aspects of all religions. The excellent precepts of the Headmaster of the Mission school were most

acceptable to us Hindus. But I am sure you do not wish me to embark on a religious controversy."

"Certainly not! If I did I should soon get the worst of it. Though, mind you, Motamid Sahib, I should thoroughly enjoy an argument with you. I have read a good deal of Hindu philosophy and admired much of it."

The Motamid looked surprised at this. "That is unusual, Sahib. Your countrymen do not often concern themselves with such matters. I shall have to be very wary of what I say. You have studied Sanskrit?"

"Yes. Though I cannot pretend to be a scholar."

"Then I must address you as Pundit. This is very good news to me." He leaned forward as he said this, and an expression in his eyes told me that he was uttering no idle compliment, but that he was deeply interested in what I had said.

"No, no," I disclaimed. "I have merely studied Sanskrit by myself without being properly taught. I have but a smattering of the ancient language—enough to be able to read a little of the classical lore of India as a hobby. You see, I was rather good at Greek when I was at school—it came easily to me—so I found it fairly easy to study Sanskrit to which Greek has many affinities."

"This is very interesting. So you can read Sanskrit?"

"Well, fairly well. I must not make too great pretensions or I shall be shown up as a foolish boaster."

"But you could read our ancient books?"

"With the help of a crib and a dictionary."

"As I used to do at school," chuckled the Motamid.

"And you could decipher an ancient inscription?"

"As to that, I am not sure. But perhaps I can safely brag about that since there are no ancient inscriptions hereabouts."

The Motamid paused and contemplated me with a shrewdly appraising glance. "You know, Mr. Vallerder, this conversation has taken me by surprise. I came

meaning this to be merely a formal visit enjoined by good manners, but we have plunged straightway into matters of the highest importance. You have given me much to consider about. Then I will come and see you again. I did not expect to find that so prosaic a person as an engineer would turn out to be a Pundit. That may make a great difference to . . . I mean, His Highness will be very interested."

"I shall be delighted if my hobby will help to bring us closer together, Motamid Sahib. I shall have to worry you a good deal, I expect, about the various matters that crop up between the railway and the State officials. Although I have always received every possible help from them. In fact, I was a little puzzled when . . ." I stopped and floundered on the verge of dropping a brick and the Motamid flashed a smile at me.

"I know what you would say. You wondered why it was necessary to appoint a Motamid when your relations with the State officials were already so harmonious. We have nothing but good reports of your dealings with the local officials and with the people. But when His Highness gives an order we must obey. His Highness is a very wise man, Sahib."

"Without doubt," I agreed politely, and the conversation drifted off into generalities. The Motamid was a pleasant companion and half an hour passed quickly. I pressed him cordially to come and see me again and he responded warmly.

"Indeed, I shall need no strong pressure, Sahib. I will help you willingly with your difficulties about the railway, though I think you are quite capable of settling them for yourself. But we shall meet again before long. I will, of course, come and bring you my good wishes on the Bara Din for a Happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year. Also . . . I will tell you if there are any old buildings with Sanskrit inscriptions on them which you would like to try and decipher."

“Here? I did not know there were any . . .”

“This is a very old part of India, Mr. Vallender.”

“But Sanskrit inscriptions!” I protested. “Surely there are none. I know that many ancient documents have been preserved or copied from one generation to another, but inscriptions are another matter altogether.”

“Very true. But the Nimli Hills are not like other hills. Maybe there is something very ancient there, Sahib.”

“Have you been sent here because I am driving a survey through the Nimli Hills? Is that why you did not come before, so long as I kept away from the Hills?”

“I cannot say. I have come because I have been ordered to come by His Highness, who is a very wise man.” The Motamid smiled to take the sting out of his obvious evasion of my direct questions.

“All right, Motamid Sahib. But it looks as if I too shall have much to consider over after our meeting.”

“Indeed,” he replied soberly, “that is very true. I am sure that you will consider very carefully all matters that have to do with the Hills. Not only the people of the Hills, Sahib, but also the place—also the place. You will remember that? Now I beg leave to depart.”

The catchemaliveohs once more formed up behind the Motamid and the proper courtesies were exchanged. He marched off to the bullock ekka, and soon the Motamid and his escort vanished in a cloud of dust as the white bullocks trotted quietly away over the track to Barwara City.

CHAPTER FOUR

I MUST confess that I felt considerably bothered by the atmosphere of mystery that seemed to be closing round me. That is rather a melodramatic way of putting it, but I think it is not a bad description of how I felt at that time. The Indian staff and the workmen managed to convey an inscrutable air of sullen uneasiness for which it is difficult to find an English word. There is a Hindustani word for it which will occur readily to anyone who knows the language, and it was very much in my mind during that terrible Christmas.

Of course, I tried to exorcize the demon which possessed us all by making direct inquiries from Chota Lal and Boota Singh as well as from Abdul. But, as I might have known, this proved to be useless. I got nothing but an affectation of mulish stupidity and the repeated exclamation 'I do not know', or 'I am a poor man without understanding', which drove me to such a pitch of exasperation that I could barely keep my temper. It is only fair to say that Chota Lal, being an educated man, made no great pretence of ignorance, but it was obvious that he evaded answering my questions.

"Look here, Chota Lal," I said, "how many years have we worked together on one job and another?"

"Sir, it is many years."

"Then why do you refuse to answer me when I ask what is the matter with you all?"

"Sir, there is nothing the matter."

"Nonsense! Ever since I employed Mistri Donovan the whole Division has gone mad. If the man is unsatisfactory he will be dismissed. But he is working

well. Why then should he not be employed? ”

“ It is true that he is feared by all men.”

“ What! Donovan feared? Why? Has he been beating anyone? ”

“ Oh no, Sir. But they say that he is high in your favour and they fear what report he may make to you.”

“ You know that is not true. When does Donovan ever see me in private so that he may make evil report to me? Such a thing would become known to everyone here. It could not be hidden.”

“ Quite right, Sir. We educated men do not believe this tale. But there are others, many others, who will believe any foolish story the more readily the more foolish it is.”

“ Well, I think it is ridiculous that there should be so much fuss about one man. What do they fear he will do? ”

“ Sir . . . ” Chota Lal hesitated. “ It is not so much Mistri Donovan that they fear as that which may come out from the Nimli Hills. If you would be pleased to employ him somewhere else than in the Hills . . . ”

I groaned aloud. “ That is another matter about which I can get nothing but vague hints. What is wrong with the Nimli Hills? There are men living there . . . ”

“ Sir, the men living in the Hills are not the same as the men who live in the Plains.”

“ No doubt. I have seen some of them and I must say they are a wild-looking lot. But I suppose they are Hindus . . . ”

There was a shocked interruption from Chota Lal. “ Sir, Sir! They are not Hindus. If they were, we Brahmins might accomplish something. But in all the Nimli Hills there is no Hindu temple. That is why it is such an evil place . . . ”

“ Oh, don't talk nonsense like the rest, Chota Lal. You are an educated man . . . ”

“ It is for that reason that I speak with some small

knowledge. I have read the Rig-Veda—as you also have. We know that devils must be resisted by methods understood by the Brahmins.”

“But all that sort of thing happened thousands of years ago. Surely you don’t believe that there are demons living in the Nimli Hills. Really, Chota Lal, I did not expect you to talk like that. I can well believe that the ignorant coolies might get superstitious ideas into their heads; but you, Chota Lal . . .”

The old man smiled. “It is true that I have grown old in the service of the Government, and I have served many officers. I know that they go through their service in India with their eyes shut to many things, and perhaps that is well for them. But your eyes will not remain shut. You have read the ancient Scriptures and your mind is illuminated. The Great Ones will guide you. That is why you do not fear to speak face to face with demons . . .”

Chota Lal ran on like this for some time and I only half listened to him. His words were not unlike the sort of stuff he used to ladle out when he wished to compliment me about my humble efforts to understand something of the ancient literature of the Hindus, which had only become known to the Western world in the nineteenth century, when the astonishing wealth contained in documents which had been handed down for untold ages was made available to scholars. I had no pretence to scholarship, but Chota Lal strongly approved of my casual studies, and he had lent me a good many books as well as helped me with them, for he was a Pundit, that is to say, a learned man who knew Sanskrit pretty well. So I attached no particular meaning to the way he now spoke and presently I cut in on his flattering discourse with a further question.

“That’s all very well. But if the Nimli Hills are such an evil place, why do men live there? Donovan comes to no harm when he goes to work there. Neither do my

surveying party. Besides, there are two Americans there as everyone knows. I think I had better ask them if they have seen any devils or demons." I intended this as a mildly sarcastic dig at Chota Lal, but he received it quite seriously and even with satisfaction.

"That will be more better," he agreed heartily and, gathering up his papers, he departed to his own sanctum to wrestle with a broadside he had received from the Audit officer.

I got little more information from Boota Singh. He took refuge in a profession of complete ignorance about everything and muttered darkly about the displeasure of Indra. Abdul was a little more explicit when I asked him point-blank what he knew about the Nimli Hills.

"I know nothing. Unless it be what all men know. That it is the abode of unbelievers and a place where demons dwell."

This was picturesque enough but not very illuminating, and I said something of the sort to him. He stuck his grey beard out with a slight toss of his head. "A fit place for Mistri Donovan. Let the man be dismissed! He will rob you. Maybe he will murder you."

"Bosh! Justice must be done. If he works well, why should he be dismissed? Answer me that!"

"Justice! Bismillah, justice is not for such a one as that. What next?" The old man stumped off into the back regions of the bungalow leaving me thoroughly disgruntled. I could no longer pretend to myself that things would come right. It was too painfully clear that everyone was seething with discontent and that Donovan was the cause. Either I must get rid of the man or else I should find my work seriously interfered with by the unsettled state of mind of my staff. It was not only that they disliked and feared the man, but also that there was a lot of superstitious hocus-pocus mixed up with the affair—and I knew better than to disregard this. I began to come round to the views held by everyone

about Donovan. If he were such a disturber of the peace he had better go. Then we could get on with the job in peace and quiet once more.

But I held my hand for a sentimental reason. With Christmas so close I could not bring myself to go back on everything I had told Donovan and chuck him out forthwith. I still had a lingering hope that the man might be reclaimed if given a chance and I decided to wait until after Christmas. Meanwhile, I would go myself along the new line through the Hills and have a talk with the man. I never saw him about the Camp, and he seemed to go out before dawn and return after dark—an arrangement that suited me well, for his anomalous position in our community was slightly embarrassing to both of us.

So next day I told Boota Singh to bring the Jabberwock round and after breakfast we set out. When I turned the Jabberwock's head towards the Hills Boota Singh gave a slight exclamation of surprise.

"The Presence is not going to inspect works as usual?"

"No. We are going to the Hills to inspect the new survey through the jungle. I wish to speak to Mistri Donovan."

This was received with dead silence and I could feel Boota Singh's dissatisfaction even though I could not see him. For he sat behind me on the padded double saddle, and I had to talk to him over my shoulder. We jogged along in silence over the couple of miles or so of plain before the undulations of the foothills set the Jabberwock to labour more heavily up a steepish rise and to grumble audibly at the extra work involved. Boota Singh cleared his throat once or twice as though he were about to speak and finally he burst out apologetically.

"Huzoor! The camel does not like the path. It would have been better if you had used the pony."

"Never mind. The path will get better soon. The jungle has been well cleared for the survey party. It will be easier going there."

But Boota Singh was not satisfied. "The camel does not like a hilly path. The rocks will hurt its feet. Better give the order to return to Camp and have the pony saddled."

It was only too clear that the camel did object. The Jabberwock roared its disapproval to the four winds, throwing its long neck this way and that. Boota Singh did his best by hurling abuse at its female relations and occasionally delivering a resounding whack on its hairy sides with a formidable cudgel. But the Jabberwock only redoubled its roars of rage at such treatment and finally it suddenly sat down refusing to go farther. Boota Singh made a great show of trying to get the beast to stand up again, but secretly I was sure that he was greatly relieved that it was impossible to go any farther—at any rate not on camel back. But we were quite close to the Hills when the Jabberwock struck work and I decided to go forward on foot. It would be a matter of only a few miles walk there and back, and anyway I should have had to do a good deal of walking while I was inspecting the new survey line. So I told Boota Singh to wait for me and, taking a few maps and plans with me, I set off along the clearly marked line of pegs left by the surveying party.

It did not take me very long to reach the place where I had met the Americans. The path along which they had come was plain to the eye, crossing the swathe of cleared jungle made by Donovan and his men. The jungle was pretty thick, but there were no large trees, as the soil was thin and unable to sustain big growth on the rocky terrain. But there were lots of dak and babul trees as well as innumerable thorny shrubs which could afford dense cover to men or animals, while a thickish tangle of grass left over from the last rains made visi-

bility impossible for more than a few yards. It was very quiet in the middle of the day, and I listened in vain for any sound of men working or of animal life stirring. However, there was no gloom, since the trees were not tall, and the bright sunshine dispelled any tendency to depression of spirit which dense jungle so often brings.

I tramped steadily along the narrow width of cleared jungle, expecting to come across Donovan or the survey party at any moment. I knew they could not be far away, since progress through the tangled growth was bound to be slow. The line did not run straight, but curved round the contours of the mounting hills as was to be expected. But I shook my head at what I saw, because it was as plain as a pikestaff that the line was most unsuitable and would be devilish expensive to construct. It is difficult to judge levels accurately with the eye, but I was certain that the rise up which I was pounding was much beyond the prescribed maximum gradient. This would mean that there would have to be deep cuttings in rock or even a tunnel, which would never do. I do not want to cloud my narrative with technicalities, but I want to make clear that the survey party was obviously on the wrong track. Some other line would have to be selected.

I pressed forward so as to stop work on this unlikely line before more time was wasted. I was surprised that my experienced men had not turned back and reported to me sooner. And then I came to the end of the cleared line. It stopped abruptly, nowhere in particular, and there was not a soul to be seen. Of Donovan and his gang, and of the survey party, there was not a sign. And there was no sound of them either. Nothing but silence.

I think that annoyance that the men were not on their job was the first emotion that I experienced. And then, of course, it struck me how odd it was that I had met

no one while I tramped the odd mile or so from the Americans' path. There was no other cross path that I had seen, so the gangs must have been nowhere near their work.

There was no object in staying where I was so I started to walk back the way I had come. I did not quite like the situation in which I was, although no idea of danger occurred to me. It was not as if hostile people were to be feared, since the inhabitants of this part of Rajputana are pleasant, friendly folk. Nor did I have much fear of wild animals, for dangerous beasts such as tiger or panther would be lying up in their lairs at midday. But the lonely silence of the jungle was daunting, and I was troubled at the defection of my work-people. It was not like them to let me down like this. However, I walked along without anything happening, and it was easier walking descending the grade. Once more I shook my head at the steepness of the slope, and made up my mind to try some other way round.

I am sorry again to have to intrude technical affairs, but they are the key to the whole affair. If I had not felt worried about the wrong line the survey party had taken, I should not have been thinking how best to cast round for a fresh start. The jungle was too thick to allow a clear look round from some high spot unless I could get up to one of the crags which were visible all round whenever the trees permitted. And it was just because I wanted to get to a high spot above the trees that I hit on the plan of going along the Americans' path which seemed to lead in the right direction. Thus, it was simply because I was an engineer anxious to get on with his job that I took a step which was to lead me to the heart of the mystery.

I reached the path and turned into it without hesitation. It was a clearly marked path, but the going was not so easy as it was along the swathe cleared by Donovan and his gang. There was evidence of a good deal of

coming and going, but it was very narrow, and it wound in and out as such paths do. However, it rose sharply, and that was what I wanted. My expectation was that it would eventually take me to a place whence I could get a comprehensive look round and select a better line of attack for the survey party to tackle. This proved to be the case, for the jungle thinned after I had gone about half a mile, and the path took a sharp upward turn among the tumbled rocks at the foot of a rocky hill.

I scrambled up the path, which was easy enough, and soon found that it led to a little defile between the higher crags. In my search for a clear view over the country I left the track near the defile and climbed a likely looking knob of rock. To my delight it proved to be just what I wanted, and a flat-topped boulder made a grand eyrie from which to spy out the land. The path lay almost vertically below me and I could have tossed a stone on to it, so close above it did my look-out post lie. I spread out a map and fastened its corners down with stones against the slight breeze which might have blown it over the edge, and had a good long ponder over the problem of the re-alignment which the Chief had ordered. I could look right out over the nearer hill-tops to the plain where my railway was to be seen as a brown smudge running with firm straights and curves till it passed out of sight. And I could also see part of the swathe cut through the jungle by Donovan making for an impasse which was quite obvious now that I could get a comprehensive view of the land.

I marked on the map a more likely line of advance, and then folded it up. But I did not depart, for it was indeed a pleasant spot, and the sun shone with a gentle warmth in the Rajputana midwinter. I stretched myself out at length on the flat rock and enjoyed a stand-easy while the jungle lay still and silent below me. A peacock screamed once or twice as though something had disturbed its noonday siesta, but they are nervous

birds and easily flustered into shrieking protest, so I did not attach any significance to the noise. The sound died away and the complete silence of the jungle lay over everything.

I was brooding happily over the engineering problems when I was roused from my mood of bland contentment by a most extraordinary sound. For a moment I thought that the peacocks had started to screech again. But this was no peacock. It was a long drawn-out scream and it came from somewhere not far off in the direction where the pathway led. I was familiar with most jungle noises, but I could not place this horrid sound as coming from any animal that I knew. I sat up puzzled and wondering whether I had heard the death-cry of some poor creature that had been pounced on by a beast of prey. But even as I wondered I think I was telling myself that this had been no animal cry, but the terrified shriek of a human being—whether man or woman I could not say.

Then I heard a shot fired and there was a sudden babel of voices which was stilled as quickly as it had arisen. The Americans, of course, I told myself—out shooting and maybe they had wounded something which had given that queer cry. But that would not do, because the cry had come a minute or two before the shot. The idea occurred to me that they might have injured one of the big baboons that swarmed in the Hills, and I had once been told that a wounded monkey screams very like a wounded man. But then the scream and the shot had come in the reverse order . . . and then I heard the sounds of men coming along the path.

My first instinct was, of course, to scramble back to the track and ask if the newcomers had heard the sound which had so alarmed me. And then something told me to keep quiet and do nothing of the kind. I was still under the influence of the slight shock that the scream had caused to my contented mood, and I decided

that I had better see who it was coming with such haste before I went to meet them. I had not long to wait. Donovan burst through the narrowest part of the defile, and if ever a man was scared out of his wits it was the man whom I had tried to reclaim.

I could see him quite plainly, but it was unlikely that he would see me unless he looked up to where I crouched among the rocks. He paused a moment before tackling the rugged descent from the defile as though he were at the end of his strength. He had to steady himself against the big boulders lining the track, and his knees appeared to be about to give way. Then he braced himself for the effort, but before he could move Ephraim Potts sprang into view and gave a shout to someone behind him.

"Here he is! I've got him!" He seized the unfortunate derelict by the collar, but fear gave Donovan strength, and he tried to wriggle free.

"Let me go, you brute! God! Let me go!"

"No bloody fear! You little rat! I'll shake the life out of you!"

"Don't stop here! It'll get us. It'll get all of us."

"Oh yeah?" Shorty had an automatic in his hand.

"Take a look at that, son. That'll steady you, eh?" Shorty shook Donovan with his mighty paw. "Try to run out on us, would you? Well, think again. You breathe a word to that goddam Englishman and you'll get what's coming to you quicker than . . ."

"Oh, God! You don't understand. Talking to you is like talking to an animal." Donovan shot a venomous glance at Shorty. "You don't understand anything and you never will."

Shorty laughed contemptuously. "No one can understand a damned haw-haw Englishman. But maybe John P. will be able to make you understand that . . ." He lowered his voice so that I could not catch what was said. Hitherto the two men had been shouting at one

another angrily and there was no difficulty in overhearing them. But now their voices diminished to a growl and I could only pick out a word here and there. Donovan sank to the ground, propped against a rock, while the huge Ephraim Potts stood over him uncomplacably. Donovan's hat fell off and he made no attempt to retrieve it. He buried his head in his arms which were propped upon his bony knees in an attitude of deep dejection. Shorty stared down at him and said something which I could not hear and the miserable Donovan shook his head feebly. It looked as if the burly American were about to administer a brutal kick, but there came an interruption. A rabble of hillmen emerged from the defile accompanied by the other American, John P. Winger.

The hillmen were a wild-looking lot, quite different from the mild villagers who dwelt in the plains. Their skins were much darker than the mellow brown of the Rajputs. Indeed they were almost black—a fact which would alone be enough to make the true Indians look upon them with horror and fear. They were obviously of a Dravidian type, that is to say, they were a throw-back to the ancient aboriginal inhabitants of India before the coming of the fairer skinned Aryans. I knew, of course, that there were many survivals of this ancient race in odd parts of India, but it was a surprise to me to find some of them still dwelling in the Nimli Hills. I began to understand the dread they inspired in the plainsmen, peaceable village folk proud of their noble descent from generations of civilized people. To them these dark creatures lurking in the rocks and forests of the Nimli Hills would be objects of physical fear and superstitious dread.

John P. Winger spoke out loud so that I could hear what was being said once more. "So you've got him all right! Huh!" Somehow I felt that the taciturn Winger was more to be feared than the bigger man. He

joined Shorty and stared down at Donovan with a thin-lipped smile.

"Sure!"

"What's the matter with him?"

"What's the matter?" growled Shorty contemptuously. "What's always the matter with him?"

"Been drinking again, have you?" inquired Winger malevolently of the crouching figure of Donovan.

"No," gasped the derelict.

"Drinking and seeing things again, eh?"

"No! I swear I haven't! I haven't touched drink since . . ."

"Aw, cut it out!"

"I tell you I saw it with my own eyes. You don't understand what you are doing. Oh, it's no good talking to you. You are devils yourselves and you'll go to the devil your own way. But you won't take me with you. I won't stand it. . . ." Donovan's thin voice rose to a shriek and then died away. He had stirred from his attitude of hopelessness, but now he sank back exhausted by his feeble effort. The two Americans made no reply, and when they spoke again it was in an undertone which I could not hear.

It was evident that they were debating what to do with Donovan, for once or twice Shorty jerked his thumb at the man to emphasize what he was saying. The hill-men squatted round among the white men but made no sound. I noticed that a few of them were armed with queer old matchlock guns which were common enough in the remoter parts of Rajputana, but others carried bows and arrows, while all of them had formidable wooden staves bound with brass. They were dressed in ragged loincloths and shirts over which some of them wore a short quilted coat. A tightly rolled turban completed their outfit, and they sat and watched silently while the white men talked.

At last the Americans decided what to do. At least

it was Winger who decided, although Shorty made a grumbling protest which reached my ears.

"He'll rat on you. . . ."

"No, he won't. He don't dare."

"All right. Go ahead. Don't mind me. Make him tell them in front of us. I wish we understood their damned lingo. We could throw him out on his ear . . ."

There was some more talk and then Donovan was dragged to his feet unwillingly and apparently received his orders. He turned to the hillmen and spoke in execrable Hindustani to them to which the headman made a voluble reply.

"What's he say?" asked Shorty suspiciously.

"He wants double pay for his men and treble for himself. You'll have to give it."

"Tell him to go to hell. . . ."

But Winger intervened and the voices died down again. It was terribly tantalizing to hear snatches of talk quite clearly now and again only to lose the thread of it all a moment later. But I dared not move or try to crawl closer, and presently Donovan called the hillmen to follow him. He disappeared down the track towards where he ought to have been at work, while Shorty and Winger vanished in the opposite direction. I waited some time before venturing to make my way back to Camp.

To say that my brain was in a whirl is a *cliché* that most emphatically understated the case. I could make no sense out of the fragments of talk that I had heard, but the violence and truculence of the two Americans left me in no doubt that there was something badly wrong. I had to make up my mind what line to take and I had to do it quickly. Here was I alone in the jungle with no one whom I could trust—no one of my own race, I mean. Ought I to go straight to the State officials with my story? My relations with them were

excellent, and they would give me a patient hearing. But could I make a convincing story that would be worth the telling? They would doubtless smile politely and advise me to get rid of Donovan. What else would there be to say? I could only tell them of my impression that the strangers were up to no good. Yet Donovan's terror and the fear in which he held something beyond the two men were firmly fixed in my mind. It seemed absurd to me that all I had overheard was a trivial dispute about something of no importance. No! It was something of desperate importance which they wanted to keep from me.

And then I remembered the Motamid. That is what I would do! I would tell him the whole yarn and see what he made of it. Meanwhile I would keep my eyes and ears open. Donovan must go, of course. The man was absent from his work without leave, and that was enough to enable me to give him the sack without further ado, Christmas or no Christmas. I had been a fool ever to think that such a hopeless case could be redeemed, and my staff had been right about the man from the first. Old Abdul would smile with sardonic triumph when I told him the news. As to the Americans . . .

It was a good hour before I made a move. I made my way back to the line of the survey without incident. And then I suddenly remembered Boota Singh and the Jabberwock. Suppose Donovan had gone straight back to Camp he would have met Boota Singh waiting for me. Boota Singh would tell him that I had gone up the line of the survey, and that would set Donovan wondering where I had actually gone. Well, probably no harm was done. There were only three ways I could have gone. Firstly, straight up the line of the survey to the end of the jungle-cutting, as I actually had done. Secondly, up the Americans' path, as again I actually had done. Thirdly, down the path in the opposite direc-

tion, as I had not done. If necessary I could convey that I had taken the third course. That seemed to dispose of the difficulty. But I decided to go again up to the end of the jungle-cutting in case Donovan and his gang had resumed their lawful labours at that point. This seemed to me to be highly probable since Donovan could not expect to escape detection if he continually absented himself from his job.

It soon proved that my guess was right. I had not gone far when I heard the sounds of men at work. It was a relief to hear the honest ring of axes and the harsh rasp of a saw. There were human voices, too, calling to one another, and the silence of the jungle was broken by a dozen comforting sounds. I strolled up to them and nodded to Donovan who came hurrying forward when he saw me. He mopped his brow and bade me good afternoon.

"I'm glad you have come, Mr. Vallender," he said.

"I thought I would have a look to see how you are getting on," I answered. "Where is the survey party? I've seen no sign of them."

"That's just it. That's why I am glad you have come. I want further directions along a new tangent."

"I can give you orders about that at once. We are on the wrong tack, I think. This line is impossible. The grade is far too steep."

"I don't see anything wrong with it. It will be easier going when we reach the summit."

"I don't agree. I can't be sure until I have seen the longitudinal section. I'll have a look at it to-night. But I am certain we shall have to abandon this line and try another way round."

Donovan turned sulky at this. "It looks as if I'm wasting my time here."

"Don't be a fool, man. What does it matter to you where you take your gang?"

His shifty eyes slewed this way and that. "Nothing. Only I hate being messed about."

"How does your new gang suit you?"

"Oh, they're all right. They know the country. The others were no good. They kept on running away. It looks to me as if your survey party has run away, too."

"From what?"

"I don't know. You never know what these damned natives have got into their heads."

"Are you afraid to work here?"

"It's all right here. It's too far away from . . . I mean it's near enough to the plains to get away in time. Though I wouldn't care to be here at night."

"Neither would I. The place must be full of tiger and panther."

Donovan agreed. "Yes, tiger right enough. A couple of them!"

"What!"

"I've seen 'em." He actually managed a sort of sardonic grin. He seemed to have recovered from his fright of an hour or so ago. "You would have seen them yourself if you had been here a short while gone." He sniggered a laugh again. I understood what he meant, but, of course, I could not give away the fact that I took his meaning. And equally, of course, I realized that I could not tax Donovan with being absent from duty—not yet at any rate. So I pretended to take his remark about the tiger literally, and he gave me a graphic description of seeing two tigers walk out of the jungle into the clearing. After some more talk I told Donovan to finish what he was doing for the day and I would let him have fresh orders for the morrow. He grumbled something about knowing what he was doing without needing orders, but he bade me good-bye with a fairly good grace. Just as I was going he put an odd question to me.

"Do you carry a pistol?" The question came

abruptly as I was turning away to walk back along the cleared line.

"A pistol? Of course not."

"I should if I were you."

"Good heavens! I haven't got such a thing. What should I do with one?"

"Oh, well, I don't know. I wish to God I had one." The words burst out with a genuine ring. "I hoped you might be able to lend me one."

"I'm sorry. I have a gun and a rifle, of course."

"Could you lend me the gun? You could keep the rifle for yourself."

"I'm sorry again. I can't lend you either gun or rifle."

He made no comment on this and I walked off. The silence of the jungle closed round me once more, and it seemed to me to be a hostile silence. No sound at all! And yet I had the uncomfortable feeling that unseen figures were following me through the apparently impenetrable tangle of undergrowth. Once or twice I stopped and peered round so strong was this impression, but I could see nothing. I passed the end of the Americans' path and as soon as it was behind me I sensed that I was no longer being followed. Perhaps it was imagination, but it looked as if Donovan wanted to make sure that I did not turn into the path. Or perhaps it was only the hillmen who wanted to make sure.

The jungle began to thin out and presently I reached Boota Singh squatting patiently alongside the ruminating Jabberwock. His lined old face creased into a thousand wrinkles as he welcomed me with obvious relief. Before he could speak the Jabberwock shattered the silence with a series of terrific roars of despair at the prospect of having to do a job of work. It was not until we were in the saddle and the Jabberwock had reconciled himself to the inevitable that we were able to exchange a word.

"Is all well, Boota Singh?"

"Very well, Sahib."

"You saw no demons?"

"Nay, Sahib, do not laugh. Doubtless I am a foolish old man."

"Did you hear a shot fired?"

"Assuredly. And I feared much, knowing that the Sahib was unarmed."

"It must have been the American Sahibs out shooting."

"Without doubt," agreed Boota Singh politely. "Nevertheless it will be well for the Sahib to carry a pistol. Or to take a strong escort with him when he walks in the Nimli Hills."

"That is what Mistri Donovan told me."

Boota Singh sat behind me on the double saddle so that I could not see his face. But his reply conveyed to me the aristocratic contempt that his handsome features must have shown. "That one! Doubtless he intends to rob you of it."

"I told him that I did not possess a pistol."

"Very good talk! Yet the Sahib has a Mauser pistol."

That was quite true. Boota Singh had often cleaned it for me. It was a handy little weapon which I used for small game and I did not think of it as a pistol. It had a clumsy wooden holster which I could not see myself wearing with any comfort. I told Boota Singh so.

"Yet a powerful weapon is what is needed."

"Against the demons?"

"Nay, nay, I did not say that."

I considered the matter as we bumped homeward. My experiences of the morning had given me a bad jolt. I had not the foggiest idea of what all the trouble was about, but my sense of happy security among all my people had been finally shattered and I felt that I was compassed about with enemies. I was glad that I had made up my mind to tell the whole story to the Motamid

and I hoped that he would be a friend in need. I was tired of hints and evasions when I attempted a direct question. It was maddening how everyone shied away from giving a plain straightforward reply. I tried again with Boota Singh, but he put me off with a vague answer with Indra mixed up with it. So I gave it up and we trotted back to Camp in silence.

The mystery of the disappearance of the survey party was soon cleared up. Sohan Lal had gone sick with an attack of fever and he had returned to Camp. He came to see me in the evening and he still looked very unwell, although the fever had abated. I gave him a good dose of quinine and told him he would be all right in the morning. He thanked me for the medicine, but he still looked unhappy.

"Sir, I ask leave to go to my home. The air and water of this place do not agree with me."

"What nonsense, Sohan Lal. This is a very healthy climate."

"Yet I am sick!"

"Why are you dissatisfied? Don't you like working under my orders?"

"Sir, I am well satisfied. But there is much fever in the Hills. If you would be pleased to give me work elsewhere. . . ."

"You are the best surveyor here. I should not like to entrust the survey of the new re-alignment to anyone else."

Sohan Lal smiled at the compliment to his work in which he was indeed very competent, but he remained obdurate. "Sir, be pleased to report to the Chief Engineer that the new alignment is an impossible one. See, here is the longitudinal section as far as we have gone. The grade is much too steep. Either there must be heavy rock cutting or else a tunnel. It is true that the line will be shortened, but that will be offset by the heavy cost of the works. Let the search for a new align-

ment be abandoned. Then everyone will work contentedly once more."

"And you will recover from your fever, Sohan Lal?"

"Truly. Without doubt."

"You know quite well that the job of searching for a re-alignment must be done properly if the Chief Engineer orders it. He would be angry if we reported without proper examination of all possible routes. As to that I will give orders later. I have already told Mistri Donovan to stop any more jungle-cutting until you give him fresh instructions."

"Sir, I ask again for leave to depart."

"No, Sohan Lal, I am not going to lose a good man like you. But I will give you leave from work to recover from your fever until after the Bara Din. We shall all be glad of a few days holiday. After Christmas we will speak of this matter again. Maybe many things will be changed by then."

Sohan Lal shot a swift glance at me. "Are you going to dismiss Mistri Donovan?"

"I did not say that."

He is not in the office

"Nevertheless I feel the fever is already departing from me. On the day that he goes all men will pray for you."

But I did not tell Sohan Lal of my determination to get rid of Donovan. I could not let him learn of his dismissal in any roundabout manner. I should have to tell him myself, and once more sentiment intervened to guide my actions. I simply could not bring myself to sack him practically on Christmas Eve. It would have been too utterly callous. I decided to let the matter stand over until after the holidays. A few days could make no difference . . . so I thought.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE Motamid listened to me with deep attention. We were sitting on the verandah of my bungalow the next evening after I had spent an easy day clearing up everything for the holidays. I had decided to close the office from Christmas Eve to the following Monday morning giving us five days clear. As I have said my original intention had been to go and stay with my nearest neighbour fifty miles away, but he had had to put me off owing to his wife's sudden illness. So I had to make the best of a lonely Christmas with the two Americans and Donovan as the only white faces I should see. It was not a very cheerful outlook so far as conviviality was concerned, but the mere relief from work was pleasant enough to look forward to. But it seemed as if I were in for a very quiet and dull holiday.

I sent a message to the Motamid asking him when and where I could see him. With remarkable promptitude he came in person in answer to my note. I was unfeignedly glad to see him, and I welcomed him with a warmth to which he responded with obvious pleasure. I told him everything about Donovan and the two Americans, linking them with the hints I had heard about the Nimli Hills and something unpleasant or dangerous dwelling there. The Motamid nodded his head at this.

"I think you are right, Mr. Vallender. All the incidents are connected with one another. But please do not let me interrupt you."

I finished my narration as succinctly as possible and then asked the Motamid point-blank what he made of it all.

"I am very tired," I said, "of this atmosphere of mystery that has suddenly invaded the Camp. I am not without experience in managing a Railway settlement so that many races and religions can live together in peace and quiet and get on with their job without friction. In fact I have prided myself on my ability in this connection. But it looks as if pride is going to have a fall. I suppose I made a bad mistake in engaging Donovan."

"As to that, I will offer no comment. If it pleases you to engage any man, that is no one's business but your own."

"That's all very well. Please don't put me off with polite speeches. I want to know what you really think."

"Then I will speak plainly. We Rajputs are a little old-fashioned, Mr. Vallender. We are brought up in the aristocratic tradition. I have read books about democracy, but they do not make sense to us—we cannot understand them at all. To us it is plain that men are of different dispositions. What could be simpler and more natural than the four divisions of caste? The priests, the Rajputs, the business men and the common folk. You have only to look round to see these four groups. To me it is simple, ordinary common sense. I have read about England, and it seems that you have these four groups there too."

"Well," I admitted, "there is something in that. But we do not segregate the four groups permanently without hope of a change. In England one of the common folk can, and very often does, rise to the priestly caste."

"Then I say that that is a bad thing and no good can come of it. Could he even become a Rajput?"

"Of course. The Services are full of them."

"Then I say again that that is bad. But do not let us begin a dispute. We know that you have made a study of Hindu philosophy, and it is clear to us that you are not of the common folk. Let us leave it at that for

I only told you about my feelings as a Rajput to explain why it seemed wrong to encourage such a one as Donovan. Such men can be ruled by fear and by force. Then they will do their work well and faithfully. But only under fear of punishment, Mr. Vallender. If you give them a position of authority they will abuse it."

"I gave Donovan no position of authority."

"No? Then I am doubtless speaking without knowledge. Yet even so there is a difficulty. How are you to threaten one of your own race with punishment as though he were a coolie?"

"I will tell you what was in my mind. I thought that Donovan was once of a better class and that he had fallen from it in disgrace. I thought I would give him a chance to climb back to the place from which he had fallen."

"Then be sure you will be disappointed." The handsome, aristocratic features of the Motamid showed the scorn he felt. "If he has disgraced his birth, let him be cast out. Thus would my own father speak if I fell short of what is befitting a Rajput."

"Yet you would still remain a Rajput by caste," I countered.

"Assuredly! It is impossible to change the caste a man is born into."

"Then why do you blame me for trying to restore Donovan to his rightful position?"

The Motamid relaxed the austerity of this expression and broke into a sunny smile. "Forgive me," he said. "I think that your idea was a charitable one and that it came from a noble mind. Yet I still think you were wrong and that Donovan will prove unworthy of the small trust you gave him."

"Well, it doesn't matter now. I am going to get rid of the man after the Bara Din."

He exclaimed with satisfaction at this. "Very good talk! But why not dismiss him now?"

"Because it is the time of the Bara Din, when our religion enjoins peace and goodwill to all men. It is a time when friends exchange gifts and good wishes for a happy and prosperous New Year. At such a time how can I throw one of my own race out into the jungle with nowhere to go?"

The Motamid nodded slowly. "I think I understand something of what you feel. Not very much perhaps. I should myself find no such difficulty. But are you so sure he has nowhere to go?"

"You mean he would go to the Americans' Camp."

"Yes. That is what is in my mind for several reasons."

"You shall tell me them in a moment. But I must first tell you that the Americans are coming to stay a few days with me over Christmas. Donovan would be unable to go to them for the simple reason that they will be here . . ." I stopped abruptly because of the expression of astonishment on the Motamid's face.

"You have asked them to stay in your Camp!"

"Why not? You know it is our custom to gather together at Christmas time."

"But . . . let me think. This is indeed news. Is it good or bad news? Let me think . . ."

I groaned at this. "Motamid Sahib, I asked you to come and see me because I was tired of men who speak in riddles. Now you are going to begin like the rest of them."

"Nay, nay . . . I will make everything clear as far as I . . . as far as I can. This requires thought. You say that Christmas is the time for friends to gather together. Are these two men then your friends? Have you met them before?" There was an unpleasant note of suspicion in his voice and a cloud came between us which I hastened to dispel.

"Of course not. I have only seen them twice. Once when they spoke to me and again when I saw them from

the rock. After the first meeting I invited them by means of a letter to which they sent a cordial reply."

"Who took the letter?"

"Donovan—at least I gave it to him to send by the hand of one of his hillmen."

"Then they will come to stay with you, knowing nothing but that you were inspired by a friendly wish to observe Christmas fittingly?"

"Well, roughly that is what I said in my note."

"This falls out well . . . well." The Motamid's brow cleared. "It will be necessary to walk warily in this matter. But I will not speak in riddles." The sunny smile came back again. "Forgive me if for a moment I was taken aback and thought that you and the Americans were . . . but there, I will not repeat such foolish talk. Now, Sahib, listen, for I have much to tell you. I was glad when you sent for me because I should have come to see you anyway and tell you all that I can."

The sun had set while we sat and talked, and I called Abdul to bring a lamp. I offered a whisky and soda and he accepted cheerfully. I said I was afraid of offending caste rules in making the offer and also said that my servant was a Musulman, but the Motamid waved the objection aside.

"It is now dark enough for me to hide my shame," he chuckled. "We are not such bigots in Rajputana as all that. Doubtless my family priest may hear of my sin and he may exact some slight penance. But it is possible that I shall tell him to mind his own business and go back to his prayers. So I accept with pleasure."

We settled down comfortably in our chairs, and it was my turn to sit in silence and listen. It was a strange story he told me.

"I am sure, Sahib, you have been thinking that my appointment as Motamid was quite unnecessary. So it is, if there were only your relations with the State

officials to be considered. You stand in no need of an intermediary, so I am sure you have wondered why I was sent here. There is a very good reason as you will soon understand. I think I will tell you first why the villagers are so frightened of the Nimli Hills and why they are very reluctant to go near them especially at night."

"I have heard a lot of talk of demons," I snorted.

"Well . . . that too shall be made clear to you. Now I think you know that Sanganir State is a very ancient State. His Highness the Maharajah traces his ancestry back to the Sun. We Hindus do not write history because the things of this earth are only of transient importance. It is the things of the spirit that endure—the spirit that is attached to the land so that it is the same thing to say that this is a very ancient State and that we trace our ancestry back to the beginning of Time. I think you know this so I will not dwell upon it. But there is one thing in regard to Sanganir State that perhaps you do not know. It is that Sanganir has never been conquered. It has preserved its purity since the beginning, and neither His Highness nor any of his ancestors has ever done homage to another ruler. That is not to say that he is not most loyal to the King Emperor. He is a strong supporter of the Crown by his own will and not by any act of homage. We of Sanganir are very proud of this, and jealous of any infringement of what we consider to be our unique position. Do I make myself clear? "

"Very clear indeed."

"I wish you to be convinced of this for a very good reason. One result of our inviolability is that Sanganir is the richest country in the world. It is the custom of the Princes of India to preserve great treasure to which each ruler must add, so that the treasure is ever growing and never diminished. I do not say that the State does not occasionally give up some of its priceless treasure. There may be such times as a Royal visit, a wedding

ceremony, or indeed a time of scarcity when the people must be fed. But it is a point of honour for every ruler to leave the State treasure at his death larger than at his accession. This has always been done by the Maharajahs of Sanganir. Now I will ask you to imagine the result of this accumulation of treasure, not for hundreds of years, nor even for thousands of years, but since the beginning of Time itself, when the gods walked the land like men."

"Yes, I see. The Treasure of Sanganir must be immense."

"Remember also that other States have been overrun and looted, losing much of their treasure. This has never happened to Sanganir, and it never will."

"Yes, the story of Rajputana contains many tragedies of conquest and destruction when all was lost. Not only treasure but everything."

"All? Maybe there were such cases. But you have perhaps heard the story of Jesselpur? It was conquered by the Maharajah of a neighbouring State who spent twenty years searching for the State treasure without finding it. And when the rightful Maharajah retook his own lands he found the treasure intact."

"It must have been well hidden," I observed somewhat tritely since the Motamid paused meaningly.

"The guarding of a State treasury is an art which is well understood, Mr. Vallender. It could not be otherwise else there would be terrible risks of loss—not only by conquest but by thieves."

"And the guarding of the accumulated wealth of Sanganir must be a great anxiety to His Highness. That is what you wish me to understand?"

"Well, not exactly an anxiety. That is not the word. Let me put it this way. You in England do not feel anxious about the invasion of your country. Nevertheless you take every step to prevent it."

"Of course. You mean that while His Highness is

well able to safeguard the Treasure, it is necessary for him to take active steps if he thinks its safety is being threatened."

"Exactly."

"This is very interesting, Motamid Sahib. Of course I know that you would not tell me all this if it had not some bearing on the curious things that have been happening since Mistri Donovan came. So the Treasure of Sanganir State is threatened?"

"So His Highness thinks. He is a very wise and shrewd man."

The Motamid fixed me with another of his meaning looks. There was the suggestion of a twinkle in his eye as he regarded me, but I could not quite make out what he wished to convey. I made some sort of polite acquiescence in his estimate of the Maharajah's wisdom, and the Motamid chuckled.

"I said that he was a very shrewd judge of character. He has a high opinion of you, Mr. Vallender."

"But . . . I have not had the honour of being received by him."

"No? Well, that is no matter. He has had very good reports of you."

"It is very kind of him to tell you so. But would you mind telling me more of this affair of the Treasure?"

"Yes, yes, of course. I promised not to make a mystery where there is none. As I was saying, His Highness holds a high opinion of you and he decided to act. He approached the Resident Sahib with a petition from many prominent Thakurs saying that too much cultivated land was being ruined by the passage of the new railway over fertile soil. He urged that steps should be taken to stop the construction of the railway . . ." The Motamid chuckled again at my expression of bewilderment. I could not make out what he was driving at. He went on with the usual sort of stuff one always hears when a new railway has to be constructed. Complaints

that irrigation channels would be blocked, nullahs diverted, fields destroyed—all the things that have to be overcome by patience and tact. But this sudden change of subject just when he seemed to be getting to the point was too much. I broke in on his long rigmarole with some impatience.

“But, Sahib,” protested the Motamid mischievously, “His Highness had to make his petition sound genuine, even if it was not so. Do I not make a convincing case?”

“Yes, yes. But the petition was not genuine? Good heavens, Motamid Sahib, what has all this to do with an attempt on the Treasure House of Sanganir?”

“Patience, patience, and all shall be made clear. The Resident saw that there was much reason in His Highness’s argument, and he forwarded the petition to the Chief Engineer of your railway asking that construction might be stopped through Sanganir State until further notice.”

“But the Chief Engineer would never agree to that. His Highness had already agreed to the construction of the line. He would not go back on that.”

“Of course not. The Maharajah is most reasonable in all things. He merely suggested that a re-alignment of the railway should be sought through jungle lands so that the damage to his cultivated fields should be avoided. You see, Mr. Vallender, if the railway ran through the Nimli Hills instead of through the rich lands of the plains much damage would be avoided. His Highness’s arguments were most convincing. The Chief Engineer readily agreed to examine the possibility.”

I took this in and breathed heavily as his meaning dawned upon me. “I see. Then it was His Highness who virtually decided on the attempt to find a new alignment. Why?”

“Not His Highness. Did I not say that many of his Thakurs signed a petition?”

"Oh! And are you one of them? Did you sign the petition?"

"Well, I may have had something to do with it."

I breathed heavily again and sat down abruptly. I had jumped to my feet when the Motamid's story reached this point. But I sat down again. "This is getting beyond me, Motamid Sahib. Why did the Maharajah want the new alignment made?"

"Ah! Now we approach the kernel of the affair. Hitherto I have spoken with some certainty regarding facts. But now we reach the point where the future is clouded with uncertainty. But let me tell you one thing before we go any further. The Treasure of Sanganir is hidden in the Nimli Hills."

"What!" The exclamation was forced from me, so startling was this sudden dramatic announcement. The Motamid nodded and went on with his narrative.

"There is an ancient Fort known as Rantumpur in the Hills. You may have heard the name? No? Well, I do not wonder at that for the name is seldom spoken by the people. The Fort is situated on a rocky ridge in the middle of the hill country. The Nimli Hills are an irregular mass of limestone ridges, very barren except for stunted trees and scrub, as you have yourself already seen. In the midst of this region there is a valley about a mile or so wide, and in the middle of the valley there rises a mass of rock a few hundred feet high with forbidding precipices on all sides, preventing access to the flat top except at one point. It is not unlike many other such table-topped hills in Rajputana, and like them there is a Fort built on the top. The natural strength of the precipices has been increased by building high walls running along the rim of the great mass of rock. The walls are built of huge blocks of masonry so that one would say the Fort had been built by titans. Perhaps it was, for it was built many thousands of years ago when the earth was peopled with strange creatures whom

the common folk call demons to this day. When you see the Fort you will be astonished at it, Sahib."

"Is it very big?"

"Yes. The rocky plateau is about half a mile long but not so wide. Not more than a few hundred yards wide. It is irregular in shape so that its dimensions vary from point to point. You will recognize it at once as being very like many others you have seen—Gwalior, Amber, and so on."

"I understand. It must be a position of great strength."

"It is quite impregnable. It could, of course, be bombarded by modern artillery from the surrounding hills. But thieves do not come with artillery, Sahib. They come by stealth. They work in secret as far as possible. They use deception, and they desire that there shall be no one to see their comings and goings."

"Well, I should say that they would find ideal conditions in the Nimli Hills. I have never had such an impression of loneliness and silence as I got among the Hills. It was positively uncanny."

"Very true. The people of the plains are afraid to go among the Hills because of . . . of many things."

"Don't I know it? They make all sorts of absurd excuses to keep away from the Hills."

"The consequence is that the Nimli Hills are indeed very deserted except by the hillmen. They are very few in number and they obey the Kiladar of the Fort. Now listen, Sahib. Strangers have come into the Nimli Hills. The two Americans, I mean. This is very unusual. Strangers rarely come to Sanganir State which is a long way off the usual tourist routes. So when two such strangers come to a place where the Treasure of Sanganir is hidden, it is natural that His Highness should wish to watch very carefully over their comings and goings."

"But surely His Highness could simply forbid the two

men to enter Sanganir State, or at any rate that part of it which is anywhere near Rantumpur Fort? ”

“Certainly. He would be well within his rights. In fact he spoke to the Resident who advised against such action. It would be undesirable to offend two Americans who might turn out to be influential men who would make trouble if they were interfered with. So His Highness decided not to prevent their entry into the State. He has not had much experience in dealing with Americans, whose manners and customs appear to be somewhat different from those of the Sahibs. He thought that it would be a good plan to destroy temporarily the solitude of the Nimli Hills and at the same time to enlist the help of one who might be willing to deal with the Americans.”

I absorbed this while the Motamid waited for me to make some comment on what he had said. I saw now why the Chief had ordered me to make the re-alignment—a typical bit of Oriental management at which I did not know whether to be amused or annoyed. I wondered if the Chief had been taken in by the Maharajah’s little ruse or whether it had all been a put-up job between His Highness, the Resident, and the Chief. I laughed ruefully at last and told the Motamid what was in my mind.

“I don’t suppose it matters now, Motamid Sahib. So I won’t ask inconvenient questions. The plain fact is that I am in this affair up to the neck now, and you can count on me to help you if I can. I suppose you want me to pump the two men when they come here? ”

“If you please. That is why I was startled for a moment when you told me that the two men were coming to stay with you. It seemed as if you already had some knowledge of my . . . of His Highness’s plan.”

“No. I knew nothing of any plan. I was merely acting on a hospitable impulse. It seemed to be the decent thing to do to ask them to spend Christmas with

me. It was the same sort of impulse on which I acted when I engaged Donovan. It looks as if I made a fool of myself on both occasions. That is what comes of letting sentiment guide one instead of common sense."

"There I must disagree with you. We Rajputs are warmer-hearted than you English. We understand and approve kindly sentiment more than cold reason. The one comes from God, the other from man. I do not doubt that you were guided by the Great Ones when you acted as you did. Later on we shall understand better."

"Well, I am glad you have explained everything at last. Let me get it right. You think that the two Americans are suspicious characters who need watching, and that they may be plotting to break into the Treasure House of Sanganir which is situated in Rantumpur Fort. There is reason to believe that Donovan is also a bad character and that he is in league with Potts and Winger. You want me to find out as much as I can with a view to checkmating them. And also you want me to push on with the survey through the Nimli Hills so as to have a crowd of men working there who will rob the suspects of the advantage of working at their plans unobserved. Is that right?"

"Yes. You have summarized our talk admirably. In fact I begin to think that I might have come to the point a little quicker. But I am a Rajput and you must let me use my own methods. You English are so terribly direct in your ways. Not that I do not admire the practical English character. But I think you will find much in this affair which is beyond being dealt with by methods of reason. Do not forget that Sanganir is a very ancient land, and that Rantumpur is a very ancient Fort. It may be that the Treasure is guarded in a manner that English common sense would find it difficult to explain."

"Maybe. Yet the high-explosive of Western thieves

might blast through your defences. I suppose the actual Treasure chamber is in a place hollowed out of the rock? ”

“ The actual site of Treasure House is known only to His Highness and to his eldest son. The secret is handed down from one generation to another.”

“ Do you really mean that no one but the reigning Maharajah and his eldest son have ever known? Doesn't the commander of the Fort—the Kiladar—know anything? ”

“ Something, yes. And there are guardians living in the Fort also who keep everyone away from a certain part of the Fort. But the actual secret which enables the Treasure House to be opened is known only to the two that I have mentioned.”

“ Well then, it seems to me that the Americans, if indeed they are planning a raid, are not likely to have much success, to say the least of it. Why should His Highness be worried about them? ”

“ Because . . . because there is a good reason. I must tell you something of our history so that you may understand a matter which has been a cause of anxiety to every Maharajah of Sanganir for many, many years. Listen, Sahib. There have been many Maharajahs, and it is not the will of the gods that they shall all be as wise as the present ruler. A good many years ago the eldest son of the then Maharajah was an evil man. But in accordance with tradition he had to be told the secret of the Treasure on the day of his marriage. This was done with due ceremony. But the young man was, as I have said, an evil one, and he abandoned religion, giving himself over to dreadful practices which caused the people to fear greatly the day when he would become Maharajah. Things went from bad to worse, and then one day he disappeared. There are many tales told about the manner of his disappearance which would chill your blood with horror, but no one is sure of the truth.”

"It must have been a relief to the people."

"Yes, but to the Maharajah it was a terrible thing to lose his eldest son, even if he were an evil one. You will be able to understand how terribly a Hindu would suffer from remorse, Mr. Vallender. The Maharajah took it as a sign of the displeasure of the gods, and he spent endless time and money in searching for his son. But no trace of him was found, and the common people still say that he was carried off by demons. After many years the search was given up and the Maharajah announced that the young man was dead."

"But in such a case how is the secret of the Treasure handed on?"

"Another son was born to the Maharajah, and in due course he had the secret imparted to him."

"Then all ended well?"

"No. When the Maharajah was an old man there was disquieting news. It was said that the evil son had been seen in a foreign land. In fact it became widely believed that he was still alive. Then the old Maharajah died and the young son was installed on the throne. But still the tale of the other son being alive cropped up at intervals."

"But there was no harm done so long as he never appeared to claim the throne."

"You forget that he knew the secret of the Treasure House. It may be that he held that he was the rightful ruler of Sanganir and that the secret has been handed down through the eldest sons in each generation as prescribed in the ritual which was known to the man who disappeared."

"In that case, surely one of these sons would have appeared to present a claim to the throne?"

"So have I often said. But there is a reason why neither the evil son nor his descendant would dare to come to Sanganir."

"Why?" I asked bluntly.

The Motamid hesitated. "I find it difficult to explain to you a thing which would be quite clear to a Hindu. Even though you have read much of our philosophy, I cannot expect you to believe some things. You would listen politely, but you would laugh when I have gone because the practical English mind cannot assimilate such matters."

I hastened to assure him that I should never be guilty of such a thing, but the Motamid still hesitated.

"A Maharajah of Sanganir is no ordinary man, Mr. Vallender. He is descended from the Sun himself. Thus he has within him some of the attributes of divinity. On certain occasions he is worshipped by his people as a god. You find this to be ridiculous, perhaps?"

"Not at all. The Divine Right of Kings is a doctrine that has often been claimed by European rulers. There is nothing strange to me in the idea."

His brow cleared slightly. "Yet I do not think you will easily believe me when I tell you that the eldest son of a Maharajah of Sanganir is also no ordinary man. And when he gives himself over to evil he brings himself into conflict with the high gods themselves. Where there is such a conflict all the powers of darkness gain great accession of strength. Misfortunes overtake the land—misfortunes which are an outward manifestation of the inner conflict."

"All this, Motamid Sahib, I understand very well."

"Then it may be that you will understand that strange forces are set in motion which cause strange effects. It is not well to probe too deeply into such matters. They cause madness—and worse. The only safe course is to keep away from those places which have acquired the power of memorizing certain things."

"Oh, come, places cannot have memories."

"I said that you would find it difficult to follow what I have to tell you. So you think that places cannot have a memory? Yet I tell you that the explanation of the

haunting of certain places is that the memory of a terrible event has been impressed on the place. You English are too matter of fact. You speak and think of the earth and its materials as though they were distinct from mind instead of being, as they actually are, a manifestation of mind. There is no more difficulty for me to think of a memory being impressed on a place than there is to believe in a memory being impressed on a mind. It is the same thing—there is no difference except in degree. It needs a greater force, a more terrible event if you like, to impress what you call matter.”

I could follow all this readily enough, for he spoke in terms of Hindu philosophy. I began to see what he was driving at, and he made it pretty clear when he went on.

“Such a terrible event must have happened when the worthless son of long ago was brought into conflict with Indra, a most powerful and terrible god. What happened no one will ever know, but it is in my mind that the evil young man fled shrieking in terror to a far land, hoping to escape from the vengeance of the outraged god. Thus it is also in my mind that he never dared to set foot in Sanganir again—and probably not even anywhere in India.”

“And would the curse affect also his sons and his sons’ sons?”

“Assuredly!” The Motamid spoke with a fierce hatred in his voice that startled me. “There can be no forgiveness for an insult to Indra himself. Such a thing is impossible. Forces were set to work at that time and they will declare themselves if they are opposed. It is not for man to speak even of such things. It is a matter for the high gods themselves.”

There was a long silence after this outburst from the Motamid. It was evident that he was deeply moved, and I saw that the terrible affront that had been given to Indra long ago by the evil eldest son of the then

Maharajah moved him more than the fear of an attempt on the priceless Treasure of Sanganir.

I knew, of course, the immense wealth that is stored in the hereditary treasures of the Princes of India. There is no secret about their existence, and I have myself been privileged to see some of the magnificent jewels contained in them. On great occasions, such as a Royal Durbar or a Viceregal Investiture, the Princes wear unbelievably lovely things with a simple dignity that no Englishman could match. One of them once good-naturedly allowed me to examine his famous emeralds, and I could only sigh and shake my head that such loveliness could exist. At that function the price, if such could be named, of all the magnificence displayed must have amounted to many millions of pounds—and yet I knew that I was only seeing a minute fraction of that which was hidden away in the treasure chambers of India.

But I also knew how well the treasures were guarded and, from what the Motamid said, the Sanganir Treasure was particularly well protected. So I was inclined to treat lightly the idea that the Americans were after the Treasure. To a sober railway engineer it was a little fantastic to imagine that a couple of American crooks had abandoned their hunting-grounds in their own country to embark on such an odd adventure as the looting of an ancestral hoard in a remote corner of India. However, the films had taught me that such men do not stick at a murder or two to gain their ends. I felt that I should make a very poor job of it if I had to play the part of the heroic G Man. I said something of this to the Motamid, and he came out of his sombre mood to flash one of his attractive smiles at me.

“His Highness has no doubts, Mr. Vallender. He is sure that you will be able to find out something about the two men. Perhaps they are harmless, and so we shall be able to laugh at our fears after a few days.”

"His Highness has, I am afraid, an exaggerated idea of my ability."

"Not at all," replied the Motamid. "He is very well informed on such matters. I can assure you that he is completely satisfied on that point." He spoke with an air of assurance—in fact he spoke as if from personal knowledge of the Maharajah's mind. Now I had long had a suspicion that the Motamid was not what he seemed at first to be—just one of the State officials. I darted a suspicious look at him and shot a question at him.

"You know His Highness well?"

"Very well. Oh yes, very well indeed."

"Ah! What manner of man is he? I mean, how old and so forth?" I asked with transparent cunning.

"He is a venerable old man with a white beard," replied the Motamid with a chuckle. "No, Mr. Vallender, I am not the Maharajah of Sanganir. Yet it may be that His Highness reposes some confidence in me and has vested me with certain powers in this affair. It may prove to be a matter of some delicacy, and His Highness would not wish the Durbar to be involved if we make a blunder and offend two prominent citizens of a friendly country. He must not appear openly in this business."

"That's all very well," I grumbled, "but if the secret of the Treasure House is known to the two thieves and is not known to us, we are rather handicapped. It is not at all likely that the men will give away the secret to me."

"They might ask you to join with them. Your knowledge of the language would be useful to them."

"It doesn't sound likely to me. They have Donovan."

"Ah, Donovan! We must not forget Donovan. A man of mystery, Mr. Vallender."

"Look here, Motamid Sahib, I wish you would drop the 'Mr.' My friends call me simply 'Vallender' or if you like 'Peter'. I think the time has come to do away with formality. I should like to feel that we meet as

friends and not as Executive Engineer and State official."

The smile flashed out with an additional warmth. "I too wish that very much. It shall be as you wish. It is very oppressive always to be treated with distant formality and I grow tired of it at times. My name is Ranjit Singh. So you must please stop calling me Motamid Sahib, though it is an honourable, if somewhat humble, title which His Highness directed me to use. I will not call you Peter. It is not suitable for the common people to hear me address you so. But, my dear Vallender, I will call you that with great pleasure."

It was an odd speech, but it was delivered in a very friendly manner. It may have been that the man was not the Maharajah himself, but I was certain that he must be a pretty high official. The attractive dignity with which he spoke made that plain enough. And so we made a fresh start on a more intimate footing. Our talk had been a long one and it was dark before Ranjit Singh rose to go. It was agreed that he would come again after I had had an opportunity of pumping the two Americans.

The theory was that they had somehow got the descendant of the wicked son who had fled to a foreign country to impart the secret of the Sanganir Treasure House to them. A fantastic idea, I thought, on thinking it over after the Motamid had gone. And yet Ranjit Singh did not think the idea was so fantastic. Well, I would do my best to get the two men to talk. Not that I expected to get much out of the monosyllabic John P. Winger. The other was more voluble, and I hoped that the talkative Shorty would prove more amenable to my cautious questioning. It is rather odd in looking back now to remember that I was still blissfully blind to any idea of personal risk to myself from those two formidable men. I had yet to learn a lot about Messrs. Potts and Winger that would have alarmed me very much if I had known then what I know now.

CHAPTER SIX

EPHRAIM POTTS and John P. Winger turned up punctually on Christmas Eve. Nothing much happened in the interval before they came that need be recorded. I need only say that the unhappy air of constraint among my staff continued unabated. Old Abdul was quite incapable of being rude or disrespectful, for he had the good natural manners that all Indians display. But he made it plain that I was in his bad books, and he received my instructions to get a tent ready for the Americans with ill-concealed displeasure. However, he had the house-pride of all good servants and I knew that I could rely on him to see that everything necessary for their comfort was done.

The two men arrived at about half-past four in the evening. They rode camels, but since they had not acquired the art of driving the ungainly beasts they had to bump along on the back saddle, where the motion is distinctly unpleasant unless one is used to it. They climbed wearily out of the saddle as soon as the big brutes folded up on the ground outside my bungalow, and I hastened to meet them and welcome them. Shorty gave me a noisy greeting while Winger hung back with a slight grin on his gaunt features.

"Hiya, Pete! Here we are and pleased to meet you again." He strode across to me and shook me warmly by the hand, clapping me on the back with immense *bonhomie*. "Gosh, I'd have died if we had another mile to go. Can you beat it? Prehistoric isn't the word. Guess I'll walk back when we go. Just look at the creatures. Is there such a thing as a new camel anywhere around? All those I've seen are part-worn or

second-hand. Ha! Ha! Ha! My behind feels like the nether millstone, eh? What do you say, John?"

"That's so. That goes for me too."

"Come in," I said, fussing round hospitably. "I expect you are dying for tea."

"Tea? Well, that's real kind of you, Pete. I know you English all drink tea in the afternoon. I dare say it suits an Englishman well, and it's a fine old tradition, I don't doubt. Seems to go with old castles and the Tower of London sure enough. But John P. and I aren't so struck on it, are we?"

"Not so much. No."

"You see, Pete, how it is. The hundred per cent American, and that's us, drinks coffee. And coffee don't seem right in the middle of the afternoon."

"Well, there's always whisky," I ventured, and the suggestion was received with enthusiasm. Even the sardonic Winger cheered up at the idea. So Abdul was scandalized afresh by having to set out whisky and soda at the tea table, for I was not going to be haulted of my own tea and toast because of the peculiar tastes of my guests. I soon found that their capacity for absorbing whisky was astonishing, and it was lucky that I had a good supply.

After a wash and a tidying-up in their tent we met again on the verandah of the bungalow and settled down comfortably. I asked them if they had found all they wanted in the tent and they replied that everything was swell.

"Your servants will ask for anything they want from Abdul, of course. He will see to it."

"Who's Abdul?"

"My servant. A fine old boy who has been with me for years," I explained.

"Well, Pete, that's mighty kind of you again. Guess everything is dandy here. But we don't have servants. No, Sir, an American can look after himself. I don't say

you English don't know how to make yourselves comfortable. It seems natural to you to have servants to wait on you—nice and feudal like you have it at Home. But we just don't need it."

"But, good gracious, who gets you water and who cooks and . . . ?" My imagination quailed at the thought of living in the jungle without the efficient ministrations of domestic help. I could imagine the hugger-mugger conditions under which the two men must be living.

"Why, sometimes I cook for John, and sometimes he cooks for me. There's a well close to our camp, and the natives draw water for us. You English live too soft, Pete. I'd like to see you out West. There was an Englishman there once. We laughed fit to bust ourselves at his funny ways. Didn't we, John?"

"I guess so," was the expected reply from John P. Winger.

"Where was that?" I asked.

"Oh, way out in the West."

"Were you on an expedition sent out by Williams-ville University?"

"No. Not that time. Though we learnt a good deal about bugs that trip, didn't we, John? Ha! Ha!"

John P. Winger did not smile, but he merely looked at his friend with half-closed eyes. Shorty's noisy mirth died away and there was a blessed silence for a time. I was beginning to find Shorty's incessant gabble rather wearing. He seemed to be able to go on and on without stopping, maintaining an air of geniality and occasionally lapsing into an irritating facetiousness that was very trying. I tried to stop him and to engage Winger in conversation, but without much success. Shorty Potts soon butted in again with his endless patter.

I finished tea, but the two men continued to lower the level of the whisky in the bottle without visible effect on either of them. I tried to steer the conversation in the

direction of making the men talk about themselves, but after an hour or so I found that it was I who was being skilfully pumped and not the other way round. They soon learned that I had never been in America, knew nothing of Williamsville and its University, knew nothing of any science except that needed for my profession, and they extracted from me pretty well the whole story of my life. As soon as I spotted what they were up to, I played up to them and gave them a fairly good impression of a simple-minded damfool Englishman who was uninterested in anything but his job, combined with an occasional spot of shooting. It was not very difficult to fool them for they were full of conceit about being superior hundred per cent Americans who could enjoy patronizing a silly haw-haw Britisher. At least that was how Shorty appeared to me—but I was not so sure about John P. Winger. It is true that the more silent partner echoed everything, or nearly everything, Shorty said in his noisy way. But I got the idea that Winger was not by any means such an ass as Shorty.

I excused myself when the sun had finally set, saying that I usually had a bath and a change of clothes after the day's work. The two men accepted my excuses with the utmost geniality and evidently found that my habits confirmed them in their ideas about limeys and sissies dwelling in the British Isles. I could hear them laughing with enjoyment over the first half of a fresh bottle as they wallowed in delight at their own superiority. It was with boisterous but painfully obvious patronage that they welcomed me into my own dining-room for the evening meal.

"Come right in, Pete. You're a good guy and you're treating us swell. I'll tell the world you are." The creature clapped me on the back with such force as to be absolutely painful. "Is the old boy with whiskers Abdul? Hiya, Abdul? Guess you're a good guy too.

Shake! " Abdul hurried out of the room with a horrified look. " And bring another bottle of whisky, buddy," Shorty shouted after him.

" You're talking too much, Shorty. I apologize for him, Mr. Vallender. Shall we sit down to dinner? " It was quite a long speech for John P. Winger. He spoke quietly and he did not have such a raucous voice as the egregious Shorty.

" Always did talk too much," shouted Shorty. " But I don't say nothing I oughtn't to. No, Sir, Ephraim Potts knows when to keep his mouth shut. But you're a good guy, Pete. We can talk freely to you, eh? "

" I hope so," I murmured fatuously, and Shorty grinned at me and winked at his friend knowingly.

" Sure we can! " He aimed another blow with his huge paw at my shoulder-blades, but I evaded it in the movement to take our chairs at the table. Abdul immediately came in with steaming plates of soup. I kept my eyes and ears open for I was beginning to size the men up. I had little doubt about Shorty. His noisy bragging manner and unwelcome *bonhomie* could only belong to the lesser breed of American that the films had made so painfully familiar to me. I have never been to America so I had always had doubts as to whether such creatures really existed, but here was one in the flesh in my own bungalow and I accepted him at his own valuation. But John P. Winger puzzled me. He spoke seldom, but his voice was cultured when he did. His manners were good and he evidently understood without effort how to behave in a civilized manner—unlike Shorty whose table manners were horrid. He used occasional Americanisms in his speech, but he did so as though he spatchcocked them into his phraseology in order to create the right atmosphere and play up to Shorty Potts. But I could not place him with any confidence or satisfaction.

Dinner progressed to its conclusion without anything

emerging from our talk that I can remember. We went out on to the verandah for coffee, which even Shorty pronounced to be excellent.

"Yes, Sir. I'll tell the world. Mighty fine eats and real good coffee." The coffee was scalding hot as it should be, and Shorty poured his cup into his saucer, blowing on it lustily. "Though, mind you, I think your English custom of having cups no bigger than a thimble ain't so good. Still, I hand it to old whiskers; the coffee's good."

Winger was drinking his normally, and he seconded his companion's commendation. "It really is very good, Vallender. In fact you have given us the best dinner I have had for a long time."

"It's a pity," I said, "that you don't engage a good staff of servants to run your camp. You would be very much more comfortable than I fear you are at present."

"Oh, well, I expect you are right. But we like to run things our own way. You see, we are on a peculiar sort of job."

So he was going to tell me something at last! I pretended to misunderstand. "I should hardly think that entomology needed such extreme privacy," I said with a bland smile. "Or is there something about it that I don't understand? It isn't in my line at all, you know."

There was something in the air. Even Shorty kept his mouth shut and waited for Winger to speak. "To be quite candid, Vallender, we have not treated you quite fairly. But now that we have got to know one another better I think we ought to put an end to this pretence that we are just a pair of ordinary bug-hunters."

"Hey! Look here!" cried Shorty. "What's all this? Didn't you tell me hundreds of times . . . ?"

Winger merely looked at Shorty with his little slits of eyes peering out of his sallow countenance, and Shorty promptly dried up. "Oh, all right. What you say goes, boss. I'm only the one that's running the expedi-

tion. I just don't count, hey?" His bluster fizzled out feebly and Winger did not bother to reply. He turned again to me and continued to talk quietly.

"I like you, Vallender. You are the quiet sort of Englishman who says little but thinks a whole damn lot. You don't give a dime for a noisy hundred percenter like Shorty. You are quite right. He is a complete nitwit. But he is useful to me to run the Camp and manage the men . . ."

"Hey!" protested the outraged Shorty. "What's biting you? Didn't I say . . . ? Oh, very well, don't mind me. So I just don't count, hey?"

Once again Winger ignored his companion. "I don't see how we can go keeping you at arm's length about ourselves. Why should we? I am sure we can count on your treating what I tell you as confidential."

I murmured something or other, but I need not have troubled to give any assurances, for it was plain that Winger was going to spin some sort of yarn. He did not wait for me to give explicit undertakings to keep anything secret, and he merely nodded his head at my inarticulate murmurs and went straight on with hardly a pause.

"Of course I am sure that you spotted that our talk about being on a scientific expedition was all boloney. We come from Williamsville, however—at least Shorty does."

"Eh? Oh, sure, sure. Though mebbe I have been in Chicago once or twice. Williamsville! Huh! Sure, I come from there. Like hell I do." Shorty relapsed into ruffled silence, working his jaws rhythmically upon a piece of chewing-gum which he had produced somehow.

"There is also a university there, but I will not strain your credulity to believe that Shorty is a graduate. Some American universities are peculiar institutions, Vallender, but not so peculiar as that. No, Shorty is

a hundred percenter, unadulterated by any foreign admixture of culture."

"Sure, sure," commented Shorty complacently. "That college was lousy with dagoes. You've said it. Dutchmen, dagoes, limeys and chinks. Lousy with them."

"It is quite true that Williamsville specializes in attracting foreign students. You will see what I am driving at in a moment."

"Were you at the University?" I asked.

"For a short time." He did not say in what capacity, and I did not press the matter. "There were indeed, as Shorty so graphically described, a large number of foreign professors and students. Some Englishmen and a good many from other parts of the world. I don't know under which of Shorty's brief classification they would come, but there were a few Indian students—Indians, Vallender." He paused dramatically, and I responded suitably as he fixed me with his eye.

"Ah! And they interested you in this wonderful country."

"Interested! Huh! I'll say they did," put in Shorty. "That's why we are here."

"If you will have a little patience, Vallender, I will make it all quite clear. It is an odd story I have to tell, and it may be that you will laugh at us for a pair of gullible fools. In fact I am going to tell you because of your knowledge of the country. Perhaps you will tell us that we are wasting our time here and that we had better get back to America."

"Hey!" blustered Shorty, but Winger waved him aside.

"There was one of the students named Singh. Not a bad sort but weak. He had got himself mixed up with a rotten crowd of dagoes calling themselves a political society. I don't know what it was all about—a little bit of everything, I.R.A., Wobblies, Nazis, it didn't much

matter what so long as it was opposed to law and order. You know the sort of thing—high-brow intellectuals and low-brow criminals all jumbled up in a silly hotch-potch of mismanagement and general idiocy. Now in England, with your strong traditional atmosphere, this sort of thing doesn't matter a row of pins. But in America, a raw young country, convinced that it knows all there is to know about everything, such societies or clubs or federations, or whatever damn silly title they give themselves, attract a considerable following of rich people who are ready to cash in with subscriptions. We don't need to depend on foreign money like your pin-head parlour reds. Our high-brows can get all the money they need at home. So Mr. Singh was able to pose as a revolutionary and cash in on good American dollars. It suited him finely. He wasn't strong in the brain pan, but get him started on the wrongs his fellow Indians were suffering at the hands of the brutal English and he could talk all night. They lapped it up like pap, especially the Irish."

"But what was the object of the society?" I asked.

"Search me. They used to fight among themselves like hell on their international peace nights."

"Sure, sure," commented Shorty, glancing complacently at his huge fist. "You've said it. Like hell they did."

"But—er—were you members of the society?"

"No. But Mr. Singh used to invite us round sometimes. He took a fancy to us, didn't he, Shorty?"

"Yeah! Loved us like brothers."

"You see, Vallender, we were useful to him once or twice. He was not strong physically. He was weedy and narrow-chested like so many of these poor fish. When things got lively on peace evenings we helped him to get clear away. He had no guts for a fight. So he came to look upon us as his protectors."

"That's the word," exclaimed Shorty. "Protection!

Why not? He could afford to pay for it. We stepped in where the police didn't. Law and order! That's what we sold. All nice and constitootional."

"Shorty is expressive but not quite accurate. But it is quite true that Singh was not ungrateful for our help. We did in fact become a sort of bodyguard for him. We three were seen about everywhere together, and it was recognized that anyone trying to get at Singh would have to reckon with us."

"Well, didn't I say so? Why don't you talk English?" asked Shorty, knitting his brows in an effort to follow his companion.

"It was rather pathetic, Vallender. You know these young educated Indians. Full of sentiment and frightened of everything real. Spouting philosophy but understanding nothing. Able to bring tears to your eyes when they talk atrocity stuff about the English. But no use, no damn use."

"I don't agree with you there," I said, "but I can well believe that your friend was completely out of his depth among a bunch of American crooks." I used the word wondering whether the two men would resent it. But they showed no sign of resentment, though Shorty raised his eyebrows in an expression of mock surprise. I had followed Winger's narrative with a feeling of unreality, though he spoke plainly enough. He went on to hammer home the point he evidently wished to make, that the young Indian student came entirely under the domination of the two men and apparently held them in high esteem and even affection. But the whole tale sounded to me like the usual impression of Bedlam that I get when watching American films—it is all very interesting, but it doesn't seem to have any relation to the real world. However, I nodded my head at the right times and asked a few questions to which Winger or Shorty supplied glib answers. One thing set my teeth on edge and that was the way they kept referring to the

young Indian as Singh, or worse still as Mr. Singh. At last I could stand it no longer.

"I notice you keep calling your friend Mr. Singh. But that isn't his name . . ."

"Hey!" interrupted Shorty. "What's that? Not his name? Who told you that?" He peered suspiciously at me, and Winger, too, seemed rather taken aback.

"I mean it isn't his full name. Every Sikh and most Rajputs tack Singh on to their names. It means 'lion'," I explained hurriedly.

"Aw, boloney!" commented Shorty. "It's what he called himself. He ought to know."

"Hadn't he any other name?"

"Sure! But I couldn't remember it for long. Singh was easy to remember, and that's what we called him. It's his surname, isn't it?"

"No," I said shortly, "it isn't."

Winger supplied the missing name. "His Christian name was Ranjit," he said.

"That's it," added Shorty obstinately. "Christian name Ranjit, surname Singh."

"Ranjit Singh," I put the words together. "That sounds all right. It's not an uncommon name. Had he any other names? They sometimes have a whole string of names ending with Singh."

"I think you are right, Vallender. He did once tell me a lot about his family, but I didn't take it all in."

"That's a pity. You can often learn a lot about an Indian if you know his full name. . . ."

"I think there was a name ending in bansi or bazi. I can't remember, but it doesn't matter. It is quite true that we and everyone else just called him Singh."

"All right," I said, "but I shall think of him as Ranjit Singh. Let us leave it at that. But, forgive me, I don't quite see what all this has to do with your presence here."

"I'm coming to the point," went on Winger. "I dare say I have given you the impression so far of rather

a ridiculous society of long-haired revolutionaries not much different from any other society. But unfortunately for Singh there was as usual a small but dangerous group of fanatics among the useless crowd of high-brow idiots. Men who would not stick at anything."

"Sure, sure," smiled Shorty amiably. "I could name one or two of them if you're interested, Pete." He had juggled a knife from among his clothes and he tossed it deftly in the air, catching it again neatly. John P. Winger shot a look at him and he hurriedly put the knife away.

"It was not long before Singh got himself mixed up with these men. It was just the sort of idiotic thing he would do. The sense of power he derived from lurid talk about assassinating a well-known man flattered his own weakness and made him feel strong for a time. It was like liquor to him. He tasted sparingly at first, but those men led him on until he could not do without his daily dose of the deadly drug."

"Hey! Who said we gave him drugs . . . ? Oh, all right, I get you. Huh! That's good! Drugs! It was the chink who peddled the drugs. I don't want Pete to get us wrong."

John P. Winger darted a venomous look at Shorty and went on with his story. "Singh got himself into a bad jam. I needn't tell you the details. But Singh was practically on the spot. He came to me in a panic. I have never seen a man so frightened."

"Yeah! Squealing like a stuck pig." The ugly knife had appeared again by this time. "I'd of died laffing. Honest I would."

"The young fool had been meddling in things he didn't understand. He got frightened and tried to double-cross a man who—well, it doesn't matter now. He made a mess of everything like an Indian does when he is frightened. He was up to the neck in trouble of every kind. He clung to me with tears pouring down

his cheeks, swearing that I was his only friend."

"Can you beat it? Quite forgetting me. Huh! " The knife flashed again as it spun in the air.

"It was then that he promised me anything if I would protect him. But he hadn't much left to offer."

"Protection is expensive, Pete. Yeah, very expensive." Shorty wagged his head in solemn asseveration of this fact.

"It was then that Singh told me something that decided my course of action. You see, I was sorry for the young fool who wasn't a bad sort of guy at all. I had a real liking for him and I am sure he trusted us absolutely. I was anxious to help him, but, as Shorty truly says, protection is expensive and we had to have plenty of money for the job. To make a long story short, Singh said that he could put us on to big money if only we would get him away safely."

"That's what they all say when they have been skinned to the bone. Promises ain't no good—not to Ephraim Potts. No, Sir. I wouldn't touch the business. But John P. Winger hasn't got no head for business. Never had. Cash down, that's what I say. And if they don't lay the bucks on the table I won't play ball. That's the way to do business, huh."

"Shorty does not let sentiment interfere with business, Vallender. That makes him a useful subordinate. But you must remember that I had got a real liking for Singh. I wanted to help him. So I let him tell his tale. A very remarkable one it was."

"Lot of boloney," commented Shorty Potts.

"Briefly it was to the effect that he came of a wealthy Indian family, but that he had quarrelled with his father who was still living in India. He said that his father was very old-fashioned and refused to keep his money in a bank. He kept his wealth in the form of gold and jewels." Winger spoke hesitatingly and slowly and seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "He

gave me the address of his father in India and he gave me a letter to him. He said that his father would give me the sum named in the letter on presenting it. It was a very large sum, Vallender, and well worth a visit to India."

Shorty was staring at Winger with an expression of blank astonishment on his unlovely face. For once he seemed to be unable to make any comment. He blinked in silence and I forbore to say anything either. Winger's narrative had suddenly become bald and unconvincing, but this seemed to cause him no embarrassment. He smoked his cigarette, and smiled at me as though he didn't care a rap whether I swallowed the yarn or not.

"So, you see, here we are to claim our reward for helping Mr. Singh," he concluded.

"But . . ." I asked, "is Ranjit Singh with you?"

"No. He died."

"Yeah. Sudden." The knife was twirled again with the skill of a juggler. There was again a long silence. Night had now fallen and the night silence of the jungle descended upon the land. But suddenly the weird howling of jackals shattered the silence with its long-drawn wailing.

"What's that?" asked Winger, stiffening to attention.

"Jackals," I said. "They are quite harmless, but they sometimes give warning that more dangerous game is afoot."

"John is a little nervous at night sometimes," explained Shorty with a malicious grin.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Winger, frowning.

"Nervous! Huh! But I'll own I don't like some of the creepers. Scorpions, spiders, rattlers . . . I never could stand snakes," commented Shorty.

"Rattlers! You needn't worry about them. There are no rattlesnakes in India," I ejaculated in surprise.

"Like hell there aren't! Why, I've heard them! Think I don't know a rattler when I hear one? Huh!"

I let it go at that as it did not seem to be much use trying to convince the thick-skulled Shorty of his absurd mistake. What puzzled me was that Winger seemed to have tired suddenly of telling his story. He left the end of it in the air, so to speak. I longed to ask many questions, but I was not sure that they would be answered. Of course I realized that the story was a fake, and I thought that Winger had detected my disbelief and didn't care a damn.

I was now convinced that the two men were crooks with a purpose that I dimly perceived. Or perhaps that is a bit unfair to myself. The truth was that I was not prepared to be pitchforked into melodrama, and some instinct of law and order refused to allow me to tell myself that these two men had got hold of the secret of the Sanganir Treasure and had come to India to plunder it—and further that they were as dangerous a pair of scoundrels as could be found in lawless America. I did perceive this, but I saw it dimly, as it were, and with a lingering hope that I was utterly wrong. It was so fantastic that I should find myself in the depths of the Indian jungle sitting with two murderous gangsters who had me at their mercy if I got in their way or hampered their schemes. I must have given some idea of my incredulous bewilderment, for Winger exchanged a glance with Shorty in which I detected once again an amused contempt for a damfool limey.

“Well, Vallender,” Winger asked almost genially, “what do you think of my yarn? Pretty good, eh?”

I grasped at one fact which he had stated. “You say you have a letter from Ranjit Singh to his father. Can I see it? Or have you already delivered it? What did the old man say?”

Shorty smote his thigh with a loud smack. “Now that's real clever of you, Pete. Straight to the point! ‘I'll see you’ says Pete. ‘No four-flushing with me’ says you. Huh!”

"Of course, Vallender, you have put your finger on the very thing about which we want to consult you. I should be very glad if you would have a look at the letter. It—er—isn't exactly a letter."

"Who was it addressed to?"

"Well, you see, it is written in such queer writing that we can't make much of it. Of course I asked Singh to tell us and he read it to us."

"Yeah! He read it. But did he read it right? That's what we want to know. Singh may have been double-crossing us."

"What was the address he told you?"

"The Kiladar of Rantumpur in Sanganiir State. Does that mean anything to you, Vallender?"

"Yes. It's quite plain. Kiladar is a word meaning the commander of a fort. There is a fort named Rantumpur in the Nimli Hills." There seemed to be no harm in giving these patent facts.

Winger exclaimed with satisfaction. "So it wasn't a phoney address."

"But surely," I said, "you could have found that out before. Anyone could have told you what I did. In fact you must have known it, else why are you here?"

"Sure, sure, Pete. But we can't speak the lingo."

"It's an odd thing, Vallender," said Winger, "but we have shown the letter to several people and have asked others about Rantumpur, but they professed ignorance. They said they could not read the direction, and whenever I mentioned Rantumpur they shied off it. If it hadn't been for Donovan I doubt if we should be here. He said he knew about Rantumpur."

Donovan! I had almost forgotten about the man. So that was where he came in! I continued to put bland questions to Winger. "I see. You must find him useful as an interpreter. Could he read the letter?" Something flickered in John P. Winger's eyes. I could

see that he realized that he had made a mistake in admitting a connection between him and the derelict. I was careful not to show that I knew of this connection already.

"Oh, no. He can only talk the lingo. He can't read it. It was lucky that we met him one day in the Hills and asked him if he knew anything about Rantumpur. That was the first real line we got on the place. It is pretty well hidden away."

"And then you presented your letter, I suppose?"

"Huh!" protested Shorty. "Presented it on a silver plate. Asked the butler to give it to his master. Like hell we did."

"Shorty is being sarcastic. The fact is that we could not find the way in. It's a queer place, Vallender."

"And that's where I heard rattlers," added Shorty. "And don't tell me I didn't, because I did."

"But surely there was a gate? I know these Rajputana forts and there is always a gatehouse, strongly defended, of course, but there is usually a guard on duty there." I was anxious to find out if they had had any communication with the Kiladar.

"Yes. There was a gatehouse. But no sign of a guard. We knocked and shouted, but no one took any notice. There was no sign of anyone. When we had shouted ourselves hoarse there was dead silence. But I'm sure that we were watched. The place didn't look empty. It didn't feel empty. We stayed some time trying to find a way in or to attract attention, but Shorty began to get scared. . . ."

"Too many creepers. The place was alive with them."

"Anyway, there was no object in staying there so we returned to Camp."

"Did Donovan try to get an answer by shouting in Hindustani?" I asked.

"He won't go near the place. He says it isn't healthy."

He sees things, Vallender. I am afraid your employee drinks. We have tried to—er—persuade him to go with us, but I think he would rather die.”

It was an ordinary way of putting it, but Winger managed to convey an absolutely murderous meaning into the simple words. But I kept up my damfool attitude and suggested that they should try to overcome his scruples.

“That’s what I say, Pete,” shouted Shorty genially. “You leave it to me, John. I’ll make him change his mind.”

“No. He might die if you did.”

“Sure. He might.” Shorty did not appear to be disturbed by the idea.

“No. It is very kind of you, Vallender, to offer us the services of your subordinate. But he is not very reliable, is he? You are quite right in thinking we ought to get the help of someone who knows the language. But that is just our difficulty. You see, every native you mention Rantumpur to goes dumb on the spot. And anyway it would not be satisfactory to deal with a native through Donovan. Much too roundabout and much too unreliable. You see my point?”

“Of course.”

“Now you, Vallender, would be quite different. You can decipher the plan—that is, read Singh’s letter—and talk to the Kiladar of Rantumpur. If you are willing to help us, of course.”

“Sure!” added Shorty, twirling his knife.

Dead silence! The shock of realization was so great that I was struck dumb—as dumb as the word Rantumpur struck all those to whom the Americans had spoken it. John P. Winger was regarding me with a slight smile as though anticipating my warm profession of a desire to help while Shorty played tricks with his knife and hummed a jazz tune to himself. I had to think quickly and to convey the impression that I had

been satisfactorily fooled. For they did not know that the Motamid had told me all about Rantumpur. They did not know that I saw right through their pretended mission to collect a debt. I was certain that they did not care a jot whether I believed them or not—they probably thought that any yarn was good enough for a lonely Englishman far from all help, but if he was fool enough to believe the tale so much the better. Their attitude of genial contempt towards me showed how confident they were of the strength of their position. But my strong point was that I knew the truth about them, thanks to the Motamid.

So the degenerate descendant of Ranjit Singh who had fled the country, taking with him the fatal knowledge of the secret of the Sanganir Treasure, had parted with his knowledge, and it had come into the hands of a pair of dangerous American crooks! That was the plain English of it. Whether there was anything in the story of the young student of Williamsville University, also named Ranjit Singh, I could not guess. It might be pure invention from beginning to end. It did not matter very much. The point was that Winger and Potts were in possession of a clue to the Treasure, but that they were unable to decipher the document or to read the plan. Donovan had failed them and now they intended to compel me to help them.

"There are times, Vallender, when it is advisable to think quickly."

"Yeah! You got to think on your feet, Pete. You don't want to start an argument. No need for any unpleasantness. Sure there isn't."

I stared open-mouthed at them and had no difficulty in keeping up the pose of a damfool Englishman. I must have looked the part to perfection.

"What do I get out of it?" I gasped at last, more from not knowing which way to turn than for any other reason.

Winger laughed—a short, unpleasant laugh. “Now you’re talking, Vallender.”

“I knew you’d see sense, Pete,” barked Shorty.

“Well?” I said inquiringly.

John P. Winger and Shorty exchanged a rapid glance. I could read their evil thoughts plainly. They meant to promise me anything I asked and then double-cross me, or simply murder me, later on. This simple procedure was written all over Shorty’s complacent smirk. How I longed to bash his ugly face in!

“It’s a fair question, Vallender,” conceded Winger handsomely. “I don’t see why we shouldn’t all share alike. There will be four of us. One quarter for each of us.”

“One quarter of what?” I demanded.

“Why, of the . . .” blurted out Shorty, but before he could finish Winger turned on him savagely.

“Shut your trap, you fool!” he shouted, and Shorty wilted. I do not wonder that he flinched at the sight of his companion. The devil in the man looked straight out of his eyes for a second or two, and I shrank back appalled at the sheer evil to be seen there. He quickly recovered himself. “Shorty might try to mislead you,” he said rather breathlessly. “Honesty is not Shorty’s strong line. What I am offering you is one quarter of whatever we collect from Singh’s father, the Kiladar of Rantumpur. From what he told us it ought to be a handsome amount. I am sorry I can’t be more definite. But we will share and share alike. Does that satisfy you?”

Shorty stood up and towered over me. He went and stood behind my chair playing with his knife. Winger sat where he was with his usual slight smile. I felt utterly helpless and did not know what to say or to do. These men had me entirely at their mercy. For a moment I thought wildly of springing to my feet and rushing out for help. But to whom could I appeal? My

staff were devoted to me, but they were unarmed and no match for a couple of scoundrels armed with automatics. Besides, I should never get to the door. Shorty and his knife quickly made up my mind for me.

Winger evidently guessed what I was thinking. "I shouldn't shout for help," he counselled. "It would not do any good. Donovan is ready to keep everyone away from your bungalow until we have had our little talk."

"Donovan!" I gasped.

"Sure, why not?" chuckled Shorty.

"Then he knows of your plan to—to make me join you."

"Sure, sure. He'll be able to pay you the thirty rupees you lent him when we settle up with the Kiladar. That's enough talk. Let me help him give the right answer, John. There's too much palaver. Always is with John P. Winger. He likes hearing himself talk like a limey in his haw-haw voice. Now then, Pete, what's it to be? The right answer or my knife across your face. Across your face just for a beginning. I know lots of better tricks than that. And I don't mind hearing 'em squeal. Kind of excites me, it does. Makes me warm to the work." The creature uttered a horrid laugh.

I gave myself up for lost. There seemed nothing for me to do but agree to their plan and stave off disaster. But the time would come when I could go no further, and then there would be Shorty's knife again. I could not endure the idea of torture. It turned me sick and I knew I could not stand up to it. It was useless to resist. I was about to babble a shameful surrender when there came a sudden diversion.

A frightful scream rent the air, followed by a rapid succession of shots. Then came more screams and the beat of running footsteps. Winger started to his feet with an oath, and Shorty sprang to the edge of the verandah peering out into the darkness. Shouts of

alarm followed the screams and the flash of lanterns threw long shadows along the dusty ground.

"What the hell . . . ?" began Winger in bewildered surprise at the sudden uproar. Men came running from all directions, but a shadowy figure outdistanced them all. It made straight for the place where we stood, and in a few seconds the huddled frame of Donovan collapsed at our feet, sobbing and screaming in an agony of fear. I saw that Winger and Shorty held automatics in their hands. The knife had disappeared.

Donovan was incoherent and could only utter an unintelligible stream of incomprehensible words. I have never seen such a sight. It was dreadful to see him with sweat pouring down his cheeks and foam on his lips. He writhed on the ground for his legs would not support him, and he clung to my knees while he made animal noises in his parched throat. I shrank back and tried to edge away from him, for he affected me with horror as a mad dog would have done.

It was Winger who took the first positive action. He slipped his automatic back into his pocket and administered a kick to Donovan. "Been drinking again, hey? Lousy swine!"

By this time a motley crowd had collected round the verandah, staring at us in wonder by the light of many lanterns. It was the light that seemed to give Donovan courage. Courage! That was not the word because Donovan still grovelled. But some alleviation of his terror was brought about by the uncertain light of the hurricane lanterns of several of my men. His incoherent babbling stopped and a few words could be distinguished.

"Light! More light! Oh, my God!"

Shorty administered another kick. "Stop squalling!" he said savagely.

"It has come again!" shrieked Donovan. "It has followed us here."

"Aw, shucks! " Shorty tried to kick Donovan again, but I protested.

"Let him alone, you brute! He's in a bad way." Abdul appeared with a glass of water, and I knelt down holding Donovan's head on my lap while I gave him the glass to sip. He drank greedily, while Shorty snorted contemptuously.

"Water! What's the good of water to a drunken swine like that? Give him a shot of likker. Though he's had too much already."

"I haven't," gasped Donovan.

"Then what's started you seeing things again? "

Donovan did not answer. He was staring out into the darkness beyond the ring of light cast by the lanterns, and he trembled so violently that I had much ado to hold him. He twitched and squirmed in my arms till I bade him sharply to get control of himself. He clung to me in such abject dependence that I tried to soothe him with childish words. He was such a little wisp of a creature that I felt as though I were holding a child. He found comfort in my voice and his violent trembling abated somewhat.

"Don't leave me, Vallender. Don't let it get me! "

"Let what get you? "

"Aw, don't listen to him," growled Shorty. "He's been seeing things. He's pretty far gone in drink. Pink rats or something like that is what he has been seeing."

"Or black spiders," added Winger, with a short laugh. "I knew a man once who went out that way. He said black spiders were eating him."

"Hey! " cried Shorty, "That's no way to talk . . ." He turned away and followed Donovan's gaze out into the darkness. "Them creepers is real."

All this time the ring of Indians standing round us had uttered no word. They were quite silent, some standing and some squatting, with no more than an occasional slight movement. Shorty suddenly started

shouting at them, trying to cover his momentary display of nervousness.

"What you's all lookin' at?" he blustered. "Get out!"

"No!" shrieked Donovan, "don't let them go! It won't come into the ring of light."

I became aware that old Boota Singh was among the crowd, and he caught my eye, striding forward a moment later as if in answer to my unspoken call.

"Sahib! What has happened?"

"What's he say?" asked Shorty suspiciously.

"He asks what has happened." I spoke curtly and I turned away from the American to speak to Boota Singh. "Mistri Donovan is mad with fear. He has seen a demon."

"What manner of demon?"

"God knows! I will ask him." I spoke again to Donovan. "What is it that you are afraid of?"

"Vallender! Get out of here! Get away! Get right away! It will get us all. It's big and black with two eyes that shine. Big and round and hairy. It touched me once . . ." He buried his face in my waistcoat like a frightened child.

"He's mad," said Winger. "Mad or drunk." But Shorty did not say anything. The level tone of Boota Singh asking what Donovan had said broke the brief silence that succeeded. I translated as best I could. But I could not translate the sheer terror with which Donovan had spoken.

Boota Singh spoke a few words to the ring of impassive faces that encompassed us. There was a hiss of indrawn breath from them all—no more. Then Boota Singh spoke again and the circle broke up. The old man salaamed to me with exquisite courtesy.

"Grant pardon that I give orders without the Sahib's permission."

"I heard the order, Boota Singh, and it is a good one."

"Have no fear, Sahib. The fires will soon be lighted. Two hours after midnight the moon will rise. Then the power will grow less. Then Mistri Donovan's madness will also be abated."

"Madness?"

"Assuredly. In the morning he will recover."

"In the morning he shall be sent away."

"Nay, Sahib, that will not help him. There is no corner of the world where he can escape the wrath of Indra."

"What's he saying?" demanded Winger, and I told him. "Lot of boloney!" he commented. But Shorty still said nothing. His nasty little eyes stared this way and that with something in them that was a pale reflection of the terror in Donovan's. I addressed myself to the wretched derelict again, for Boota Singh had disappeared. His orders were quickly obeyed, and soon cheerful flares all round the Camp dispelled the shadows with a warm glow. Donovan lay back with his eyes shut, and the brighter the glare from the fires the calmer he grew. Abdul appeared again with cushions and rugs so that we were able to make him more comfortable. He lay so still that I feared he was dead, but his frail life still flickered, so that presently he slept while I watched over him. Something made me cling to his company, though I knew that he was in league with my two enemies. After all, we were both Englishmen. . . .

The little travelling clock in my room struck midnight with its tiny silvery ting. It was Christmas Day!

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHRISTMAS DAY! Peace on Earth and Goodwill to all Men! There was not much sign of it in Camp. Boota Singh came back and said he would sit with me for the rest of the night. He brought with him the Camp chowkidar and a couple of catchemaliveohs armed with their antique matchlocks. It was not a very formidable force, but it was enough to convince Winger and Shorty that they had better not try anything in the presence of so many witnesses. After a muttered consultation they bade me good night and went away to their tent.

"We'll have a little talk in the morning, eh, Pete?" shouted Shorty genially. The ruffian had quite recovered his spirits and he waved to me with a return of his contemptuous *bonhomie*. I saw them go with relief, but I did not go to bed. The events of Christmas Eve had quite knocked any idea of sleep out of my head. Abdul approved of my decision instead of scolding me as I expected. But he insisted on bringing a comfortable chair on to the verandah for me and in giving me a couple of quilts against the shrewd night air. We made Donovan as comfortable as we could on the floor. I cannot quite explain why I could not endure the idea of going into a closed room. Some instinct restrained me. The cool night air held comfort and safety now that there was a clear glow of human activity in the Camp. The fires blazed merrily and Boota Singh placed two or three lanterns on the verandah so that we were in fairly strong light. The truth was that Donovan had infected me with his fear of a black shape lurking in the darkness, and I kept staring out into the night with a

horrid feeling of apprehension. In fact it was a most unpleasant night that I spent, wakeful and worried out of my life at the situation. Not only were there two murderous scoundrels to be coped with, but also the unnerving suggestion of something unearthly. I know it sounds ridiculous to say this now, but during that dreadful night it did not sound ridiculous at all.

It is in the small hours of the morning that our vitality is at its lowest. It is the time when the flickering life of a sick man releases its last faint hold on this world, the hour when suicides finally abandon hope. I sat in my chair with Abdul and Boota Singh squatting near me, savouring the comfort their presence brought but conscious that my resolution and courage were steadily dying down instead of burning with a strong flame. Base ideas of instant flight came to me and worse temptations of yielding to force and accepting Winger's terms. If only I could get word to the Motamid, Ranjit Singh. Ranjit Singh! Damme, everyone seemed to be named Ranjit Singh, I told myself with exasperation. It was a common enough name in Rajputana—there must be thousands of Ranjit Singhs. And then I started from my chair, for an idea had come to me.

Boota Singh opened his eyes and asked if anything was wrong. I thought he was asleep, but he must have been awake, so quickly did he respond to my sudden movement.

"No, nothing," I answered. "I grow stiff. Also a sudden thought came to me. Have you seen the Motamid Sahib?"

"Assuredly. Why not?"

"Do you know him?"

Boota Singh wrinkled his lined brow. "I do not understand that question."

"His name is Ranjit Singh."

"Very good talk. A most honourable name. I have a cousin . . ."

"What is the name of the Maharajah of Sanganir?"

"Sahib, he has many names."

"Tell me them."

Boota Singh rolled out the long list of titles and names of the ruler of Sanganir. "Maharaj Adhiraj Sri Singh Jainath Krishnarajah Surajbansi . . ."

"Surajbansi!" I exclaimed.

"Certainly. Is he not descended from the Sun? All the Maharajahs of Sanganir are entitled Surajbansi."

"And his eldest son?"

"He also is Surajbansi. Why not?"

"Do you know his names?"

"Nay, Sahib. He is the Raj Kumar, the eldest son. I do not know his names."

"It is in my mind that he is named Ranjit Singh."

Boota Singh stared at me in silence for a long time, his wise old face illuminated by the lantern light so that his thousand wrinkles were accentuated deeply.

"Ranjit Singh! The same name as the Motamid! Nay, the same man. That is what you mean, Sahib? That the Motamid is himself the eldest son of the Maharajah? That would explain much that has puzzled us poor men." His eye sparkled with a new fire. "Sahib, this needs thought. Yes, it must be true. The Maharajah would not leave this great matter to be handled by a man of no importance." He thought again for a minute or two. "Jai! Jai! Herein is great hope. The descendant of the great Sun himself! Sahib! My heart grows lighter. When the powers of evil are abroad it is well that the gods should manifest their strength lest the people be devoured. Indra shall speak!"

"Yes, yes, but there are practical matters to be considered. Our lives are in danger from those two evil men."

"It is known, Sahib! Why did you bring misfortune on us all by bringing them here?"

"Because I was a fool. I thought to do a kindly deed

at a time of the year when my religion enjoins kindness. I did not know about the Americans. I knew nothing. Why did you not tell me about the Americans? ”

“ Sahib, neither did I nor any man here know about them.”

“ Boota Singh, you must go as soon as it is light to the Motamid. Tell him that I need help, that my life is threatened by the two men. Tell him that they have learned something of the secret of the Treasure, but not all. Say that I intend to feign agreement with their plans so as to find out how much they know. But he must act quickly, for the men are dangerous and will stop at nothing. Is that understood? ”

“ It is understood. At dawn I will go to Barwara City.”

“ It would be better if you could go now.”

“ Nay, I dare not. So long as the men are here we are compassed around with evil. Outside the circle of light the power is strong. I must wait till dawn. Then I will go.”

“ What time is it, Abdul? ”

“ Nearly four o'clock.”

“ The dawn will come within two hours. Let us try and sleep,” I said, though I knew that I could not sleep. Yet curiously enough, now that I had been able to decide upon some sort of action, I felt less wakeful. The nervous tension of the night grew less and my skin was not so hot and dry. Even though my plan of calling to the Motamid was a slender hope to rely upon, it was something, and I felt less alone in my struggle with those two gangsters snoring in their tent. A slender hope it was, for if my guess as to the identity of the Motamid were wrong and he was only an ordinary State official, he would find a thousand reasons to avoid taking definite action, and Winger would be able to get away with me and Donovan before the procrastinating officials had begun to move. Yet I had strong hope, not only that

my guess was right but also that the Motamid was a tower of strength even if he were not the eldest son of the Maharajah. He had impressed me as a splendid type of Rajput, and there is no finer type in the world. The more I thought of it the more hopeful I felt. If only he would move quickly, quickly, before Winger and Potts moved.

With the rising tide of hope I began to revolve other possibilities. Why not organize my staff now while the men slept and overpower them in their sleep? We were several hundred men, all told. It was absurd that we should be dominated by two desperadoes! The trouble was that we were a peaceable, unarmed little community, never dreaming that such a horrid calamity should come upon us. How should we fare against two desperate men shooting rapidly and accurately with their pistols? I shrank from the idea of exposing my unarmed staff to such a fate. Of course I had my Mauser. Could I creep upon the two men in their tent and—well, murder them in their sleep? Murder, an ugly word. For that is how it would appear. There would only be my own testimony coupled with a cock-and-bull story about an attempt on the Treasure of Sanganir. There would be an international rumpus about an attack by a mad Englishman on his two guests. It was no good—I shrank from the implications of an attempt to use the gangster technique on my two enemies. I was, in fact, involved in the cruel dilemma of the decent individual restrained by law opposed to armed blackguards who knew no such restraint. And so I remained unhappily inactive, awaiting whatever the dawn might bring.

However, I determined that I would arm myself, and I fetched my Mauser pistol and saw that it was loaded. It was a formidable weapon, holding ten shots in its magazine. It had an awkward wooden holster which could be fitted to the pistol grip forming a butt so that the pistol became a miniature rifle. It was sighted up

to a thousand yards, but I had found that it was not very accurate beyond three hundred. I had plenty of ammunition and I put several clips of cartridges into my pocket. I liked the feel of the weapon, but it was extremely uncomfortable to carry, and I had no belt to strap it round my waist, while it was too long in the barrel to carry in my pocket.

Boota Singh looked on with strong approval at these martial preparations. "Very good talk," he announced. "Now we have three guns."

"Three?" I queried.

"Assuredly. These two men of the State Army have their guns."

I had completely forgotten them, for I never looked upon the State guard upon my Camp as anything but a joke. They were armed with ancient matchlocks with which they used to shoot pigeon sometimes. But I always considered their guns as far more dangerous to themselves than to anyone else. But now I wondered whether some serious use could be made of their curious old museum pieces. I called one of the guards to bring his gun. The man displayed it with great pride. It was very old and decrepit and it was loaded with locally made gunpowder and a handful of small stones as bullets. There was a touch-hole at the butt end which was fired by pressing a grip which brought a smouldering match in contact with the touch-hole. There would then be a flash followed by a husky cough from the gun which propelled the handful of gravel visibly at the object aimed at. The marksman did not hold the butt against his shoulder, but he held the whole contraption at arm's length to fire it, small blame to him.

I asked if the gun would be any use against a man, and a look of shocked alarm came into the man's eye. "Nay, nay, Sahib. Perhaps if a double charge of powder were used something might be accomplished." I handed back the weapon. The idea of a double charge of

powder inside the ancient barrel was not one to be contemplated except as a last desperate resort. I laughed unhappily, for it was utterly ridiculous to imagine opposing two slick American gunmen with a handful of villagers armed with matchlocks.

No, the more I revolved the idea of boldly defying the enemy with opposing force, the less did it appear feasible. I should have to use cunning until I could get help. I should have to act up to the Americans' estimate of me as a damfool Englishman for the time being. It would be difficult, for they would not let the grass grow under their feet. I must play for time.

It is curious to look back and remember how I ignored Donovan as a factor in the situation. He lay there on the floor, very still and with his breath fluttering as though it would leave his body at any moment. I still cannot say how I looked upon him. Though I knew that he was against me, I had a feeling that he was being dragged along by Winger as unwillingly as I should shortly find myself. Yet I had no desire to make an ally of him. He was so completely insignificant and useless that I thought he could be disregarded either as friend, foe, or neutral. He was merely a battered derelict tossed about on the stormy sea of the bitter quarrels of stronger men. It was unnecessary to bother about such an insignificant person one way or another.

I must have dozed, for I suddenly became aware that the grey of early dawn was stealing over the misty landscape. I sat up with a jerk and saw that Boota Singh was no longer there. The two men of the State guard were squatting against the wall, fast asleep. I stretched wearily, glad that the night had gone. With the strengthening daylight I began to feel ashamed of the superstitious fears that had assailed me in the night. Donovan, too, stirred and opened his eyes, which no longer held terror within them. He murmured something and sat up, looking round him in dazed fashion.

Then Abdul came with a tray containing steaming tea and hot buttered toast with some fruit. Never had I welcomed 'little breakfast' with greater enjoyment. I poured out a cup for Donovan, and the slender meal put heart into us. Abdul went about his work as though nothing had happened, and presently I saw him going across to my unwelcome guests' tent with another tray of tea and toast. On his way back to the bungalow he stopped to ask me gravely what time I would take my bath. I grimaced at the absurd situation—pretending that Winger and Potts were simply ordinary guests to whom I should shortly be saying good morning and a Merry Christmas.

Donovan kept looking furtively at me while he sipped his tea and helped himself to toast. He was not communicative and his few muttered remarks were not very clear or indeed very audible. I asked him if he felt better and he replied sulkily.

"My head's awful. I suppose I was drunk last night. I'm sorry. I told you I was no good."

"Don't you remember what happened?"

"Not much." He watched me uneasily. "What did I say while I was drunk?"

"You were frightened about something. You were jibbering and wouldn't give an account of what it was."

"Gosh! My head! I shall have to go easy with the liquor for a bit. What did I say?"

"I've told you. We couldn't make head or tail of it. You said you were followed by a black shape or something of the sort."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. You told me to get away out of here before it was too late."

Donovan's ferrety eyes shifted this way and that. "I don't suppose you are going to take my advice, eh? I thought not. But it was good advice. *In vino veritas!*" He sneered with a silly pretence of bravado—and then

he suddenly changed his tone. "Vallender! Get out of here at once. Don't wait for those two devils to wake. I'm not so utterly rotten as all that. They mean to get their fingers into the Treasure and they won't stick at anything—anything, you understand—to get their way."

"They can't force their way into the Fort."

"Oh, God! You keep talking as if they were men and not devils. They'll find a way. Look at me! A miserable half-starved creature of no account. Yet I have been able to bully my way through India by shouting and blustering and kicking. It's too easy. They are always ready to pay to avoid trouble. Don't you see? Those two men well-armed and utterly without mercy will be able to compel these wretched natives to do what they want. And they will drag you with them. You won't like it. Get right away now."

"Then why don't you go?"

"If only I could! But it's no good." He relapsed into his usual hopeless condition of sullen shambling ineffectiveness. "All right, I knew you wouldn't go. You are one of those pig-headed idiots who don't understand anything about anything. You'll come to a sticky end, that's all. Only don't say I didn't warn you. And don't look to me for help because you won't get it."

He stood up abruptly and went away to his own quarters, leaving me with nothing better to do than to go and have the bath which Abdul had prepared for me. I was careful to take the Mauser pistol with me. Henceforth I decided it should be with me at all times so that I could meet the Americans on equal terms. Before I went inside the bungalow I noticed that there was still no sign of movement from the guest tent. I was not surprised, considering the amount of whisky the men had consumed the evening before.

Refreshed by the bath, I felt in better case to meet my enemies. I strolled out on to the verandah, awaiting the announcement that breakfast was ready. Everything

looked comfortingly normal. The early morning routine was in full swing. The water-carrier was splodging back from the well, while the country-bred pony and the Jabberwock were munching their feeds of corn. But I noticed that it was not Boota Singh who was tending the camel, but some other individual. So he had gone for help as planned! My courage rose, and the warmth of the rising sun added to my resolution.

There was a flutter from the flap of the tent and Shorty came out. He saw me and waved, shouting a genial good morning. I responded and shouted that breakfast was nearly ready. Winger joined him and they began to walk towards me. I clutched the Mauser, hiding it as well as I could, and bade the two men good morning again. I hoped they had slept well, and I ushered them into the dining-room of the bungalow—though they needed no ushering. They swaggered in as if they owned the place.

“Come right in!” shouted Shorty with tremendous *bonhomie*. “Gee! I’m hungry. Did I sleep well? I’ll say I did. You’re doing us swell, Pete.”

“That’s so,” added Winger. He had become once more the taciturn one of the pair. “A merry Christmas, Vallender!”

“Going hunting, Pete?” inquired Shorty genially.

“What?” I asked.

“Why the gun? Thought maybe you were going hunting.”

“Oh no,” I answered with great satisfaction. Both men were staring at the Mauser which I grasped firmly. “I noticed yesterday that both you gentlemen were armed so I thought we would meet to-day on equal terms.” A fatuous speech which gave me much pleasure at the time, but which has caused me to writhe with shame whenever I remember it now. The two men regarded me solemnly with an air of grave disapproval.

“Well, now, Pete, if that isn’t just too bad of you. I

wouldn't have thought it of you. Drawing hardware on a guest."

"I must say, Vallender, that you are taking rather a strong line with us. We only want to have a friendly business talk after breakfast. Let us have breakfast first."

I stood my ground, not realizing that they were playing with me. Shorty wore his most aggravating expression of contemptuous amusement, while Winger seemed to be really pained by my production of a formidable weapon.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I will only talk business if I am in as strong a position as you are. So if you don't mind I shall stick to my pistol."

"He said he was sorry, John," chuckled Shorty. "Don't be hard on him."

"Of course not! Look here, Vallender, this is Christmas Day. Can't we declare a truce for to-day? I admit that Shorty and I have our guns with us. Suppose we all disarm. Let's put our hardware on this side table. Your man can take them away."

"Say," began Shorty indignantly, but Winger silenced him.

"Well, Vallender, what do you say?"

"Certainly not," I replied. "You might have two guns on you."

"Can you beat it?" demanded Shorty of the four winds.

"Ah, well," sighed Winger, "I suppose it is too much to ask you to trust us." I hardly had time to see that the men were moving before it was all over. They were posted, one at each door, and both of them had automatics in their hands pointed at my stomach.

"Here!" I ejaculated.

"Throw your gun on the ground, Pete. Give it a kick in my direction. That's right. Can you beat it, John? A limey pulling a gun on me!" He picked up

my Mauser and examined it with interest. "A dandy little gun," he admitted. "Huh! Sighted to a thousand yards! Say, that's fine. But it ain't handy enough for the draw. No, Sir." He slipped the cartridges out of the magazine and put them in his pocket. "A thousand yards! Well, well." He grinned at me with amiable derision. "Limeys shouldn't play with guns," he cautioned, wagging his head in reprobation.

"So now, Vallender, let's have breakfast. Let us forget this little unpleasantness."

"Forget!" exclaimed Shorty. "Forget a goddam Englishman trying to pull a gun on me! Why, I'll laugh about it to the end of my days. A limey foolin' about with a gun. Sighted to a thousand yards! That's the bright idea, Pete. Next time you try that little game, you keep a thousand yards away. It will be safer."

I felt an absolute fool. I must have looked an absolute fool. Damme, I was an absolute fool! They invited me to sit at my own breakfast table, and I sat down helpless and silent while Abdul came in with breakfast, during which the two men kept up a flow of talk—at least Shorty did. I could have smashed his ugly face in with the utmost pleasure, for his talk was all directed at me with an amused contempt that drove me frantic. Winger did not say much, but he smiled a good deal. He merely nodded acquiescence now and again at Shorty's brilliant sallies. Fortunately for me most of his brightest efforts were quite incomprehensible because he lapsed into American slang that was as good as a foreign language to me.

The two men ate heartily, though they kept up a running commentary sarcastically comparing the food with what they were used to in America—much to the disadvantage of what was provided. They ordered Abdul about and shouted to him to prepare coffee—cawfee is what Shorty called it.

"Gee! I don't wonder you limeys is yaller, drinking

wishy-washy stuff like tea. Hey, Whiskers! Hurry up with that cawfee! "

Abdul hastened to and fro with an occasional look of reproach at me for countenancing the men's outrageous behaviour. But he upheld the honour of the household with an admirable dignity that was completely lost on Winger and Potts. I writhed impotently with a rage boiling up within me of which I did not know I was capable. I would have committed murder with pleasure. I glared at my guests and muttered unspeakable things under my breath, while Shorty grinned at my helplessness and added to my shame with self-glorying relish. I have never been so humiliated in my life, and I still flush with horror at the memory of that unhappy meal.

They finished at last and Winger turned to me with his damnable smile. "Well now, Vallender, let's get to business. I suppose you have made up your mind about what I said to you last night? "

I had anticipated this question coming sooner or later and I had made up my mind what to reply. It was quite useless to tell him to go to the devil. I had pictured myself armed with my Mauser negotiating with Winger and pretending to be undecided what to do, hoping that the Motamid would arrive with help before things grew too nasty. But now I was disarmed. It was no good trying to bluff.

"You will have to be more explicit as to what you want me to do," I answered cautiously. Winger seemed surprised at the mildness of my reply, and Shorty muttered something that sounded like 'yaller', Winger looked narrowly at me, but seemed to be satisfied with what he saw. I don't wonder that I gave an excellent impression of abject surrender. That was how I felt.

"Gosh! He's another Donovan," barked Shorty. "Rotten right through. Dirty little rat! "

"Shut your trap! " snapped Winger. "He is seeing

sense at last, that's all. I think you are wise, Vallender. We shall want you to come with us at once."

"Where?"

"To the Fort, of course. We want an interpreter. We have a few things to say to the Kiladar."

"He won't listen."

"Oh yes, he will. You can leave that to me." He laughed slightly. "You see, we have a letter of introduction."

"Can I see it?"

There was a pause at this. Winger turned over in his mind how far he could trust my seeming acquiescence. The pause lengthened out uncomfortably, and even Shorty kept silence as though some tremendous decision was being taken.

"Well," said Winger at last, "I don't see why not. I dare say you will not be able to make anything of it. It isn't an ordinary letter at all. It's a queer document. I have shown it to one or two, but they shy off it and say they can make nothing of it. They say it is not written in any language that they know."

"Then I am not likely to be able to translate it," I said. "I only know Hindustani."

"Looks as if it might be Greek," said Winger surprisingly.

"What!" I exclaimed in astonishment.

"All right. I will let you see it. But no monkey tricks, eh?"

"Say . . ." began Shorty.

"It's all right, Shorty. If he can't decipher it, we are no worse off. If he can . . ." Winger's evil smile rounded off the sentence better than any words could have done. He carefully took a wallet from his pocket and unfolded it flat on the table. There was a document inside it wrapped in tissue paper which he delicately freed from its wrappings, smoothing it out gently with his thin fingers. "Just come round here, Vallender.

It won't bear too much handling. You had better not touch it."

Shorty gave me a shove and I went and stood alongside Winger, looking down at the document. At first sight it looked more like a horoscope than anything else. There were characters on it written sideways and upside down, while a sort of diagram framed the crabbed writing. There was something familiar about the look of it and my heart started to beat, though I remained quite impassive to outward seeming. I needed time to think what to do, for my brain was in a whirl. I was behind Winger so that he could not see my face unless he twisted himself round, but Shorty was staring straight at me, his little pig's eyes screwed up into a shrewd glance. My hatred for the man surged up within me and I knew I could beat him in a battle of wits. I straightened myself and looked blandly at Shorty.

"It is difficult to give you an answer. I'll just get a magnifying glass. There is one in my office." I began to move off, but Shorty indignantly intervened.

"Hey! Where you going?"

"To get a magnifying glass from my office."

"Oh yeah? I'll come with you. Mebbe you might be finding something else by mistake."

"All right. Come on." I led the way and Shorty hustled along with me, shouldering me out of the way so that he could pass through the door ahead of me. Winger did not move from where he was, but he followed us with his eyes and I saw that he had his automatic in his hand.

I spent some little time turning out drawers looking for the magnifying glass, being much interfered with by the suspicious Shorty who was obviously convinced that I was going to produce another weapon. He prevented me again and again from looking into a drawer until he had satisfied himself that it did not contain a 'rod'. When I eventually found the glass exactly

where I had known all along that it was he seemed quite disappointed and murmured "Can you beat it?" in a bewildered sort of way. I had got what I wanted, which was a brief space in which to make up my mind what to do.

We returned to the dining-room and I waved the magnifying glass. "Shorty found it for me," I said. "Now let me have a look at the letter of introduction." I was beginning to feel better, and my courage returned with the thought that I might be able to outwit the two scoundrels if I played my cards carefully.

I sat down in Winger's chair, and the two men stood behind me leaning over my shoulder. I brought the magnifying glass into play, for I had made no unnecessary pretence about the need for it. The characters were small and written in crabbed handwriting and I saw at once that the writing was Sanskrit. It would take some time to decipher it in detail, but certain things were clear at once. Across the top of the document were two lines which made up a mantra—a text or charm to which magical powers were usually attributed. There was another mantra across the foot of the paper and again on each side. They were written so as to form a magic square, and even I, with my limited knowledge of such things, could perceive their potency. I tried to read the one across the foot, but it was upside down and difficult to read without turning the paper.

"Hey!" shouted Shorty. "Don't touch it."

"Why not?"

"You keep your fingers off it, limey, and don't ask fool questions."

"Shorty thinks," Winger explained, "that you will grab the paper and destroy it. It is the sort of thing that Shorty would think."

"It's difficult to read Sanskrit upside down . . ." I began.

"Sanskrit! What's that?"

"The language in which this document is written."

"Gosh! Can you read it?"

"Yes, with some difficulty. It is not written very clearly. Is this the original or a copy?"

"A copy, I guess."

"Yes, I think you are right. It is not old enough to be the original. Nowhere near old enough."

Winger nodded. "That agrees with what Singh told us. How old would the original be?"

"Two or three thousand years, maybe four," I replied, scrutinizing the manuscript with the glass. "It is difficult to say. It is a pity we haven't got the original."

"Four thousand years! Gee! You are sure?" Winger leaned forward over my shoulder, peering at the document.

"No, I can't be sure. But the original must have been very ancient. There are one or two peculiarities about the Sanskrit terminations that point to extreme antiquity."

"Well, what's it say?" demanded Shorty.

"I can't say. It will take some time to decipher. These texts round the four margins are charms, I think. What are called the Four Elementals of Power. Three of them give protection against Pestilence, the Forces of Nature, and the Powers of Darkness. The fourth and the most potent is more aggressive and is directed against an Enemy."

"Say! What's all this?" demanded Shorty, wrinkling his brow in an effort to follow what I was saying. "Charms! Boloney! Punk!"

"Oh no," I said. "Such things are very real to a Hindu. The Hindus personify all the beneficent and malignant forces of Nature and practise the propitiation of the gods and demons of their Pantheon."

"Can't he talk English?" asked Shorty in a bewildered voice. "I can't understand a word he says."

"I think I see what you mean," said Winger, ignor-

ing his companion. "It fits in with what Singh told me. But what is the rest of the document about?"

"It is more like a mathematical statement than a document. The ancient Hindus were expert mathematicians, though their notation was quite different to ours. It will need careful study."

"Mathematics! You mean measurements—lengths and widths and so forth?" It was plain to me how Winger's mind was working. For I knew that they were after the Treasure, whereas they did not know that I knew. Winger might think that I had not swallowed his yarn about the collection of a debt owing by Ranjit Singh's father. He probably had made up his mind that I did not believe a word of it. But he did not know that the Motamid had told me all about the Treasure of Sanganir. I hugged this knowledge to myself and played for time, relying on their cupidity to keep them interested.

"Well," I said slowly, with pretended caution, "I should hardly like to commit myself to that. It may turn out to be something like that. The figures look as if they were simply a sort of architectural plan of a building. There are references to rooms in the King's palace measuring so much by so much."

"Yes . . . yes . . ."

"On the other hand, the figures may be only another charm—magic numbers, you know. The Hindu mathematicians were much attracted by magic squares. I don't think this document is likely to be much use to you," I said, looking up with as candid a look as I could manage.

"What do you mean by that, Vallender?" Winger asked with a frown.

"Well," I answered, "you told me that it was a letter of introduction to the Kiladar instructing him to pay you a certain sum of money. It looks to me as if Singh tricked you. This document is nothing of the kind. At

least I don't think it is. Ranjit Singh, your student friend in Williamsville, would not write such a letter in Sanskrit, garnishing it with the Four Elemental mantras. I doubt if the Kiladar could read Sanskrit. I am afraid he humbugged you into taking a worthless piece of paper and kidded you with a cock-and-bull story about the Kiladar of Rantumpur."

"Hey!" cried Shorty. "What's that? I can't understand half what you say, limey."

"Shut up, Shorty. Vallender is telling us things we ought to know. So you think the Kiladar will throw us out on our ear?"

"I wouldn't say that. He is sure to be a Rajput. He will be very polite, but I doubt whether he will be very helpful. The news of the death of his son will be a terrible shock to him."

"Yeah, I guess so." Shorty had evidently understood this last remark of mine. "He will be mighty glad to welcome two folk who can give him news of his son. Mighty glad!" He barked one of his unpleasant laughs. So that was the plan to gain admittance to Rantumpur Fort! A dirty trick, but it would be of no avail because I knew that the Kiladar of Rantumpur was not the father of the Ranjit Singh who had died, or more probably had been murdered, in Williamsville.

"That is where you can help us, Vallender. We want you to go with us to the Fort and tell the guard at the Gate that we bring news of the old man's son. Then when we are inside we can try the effect of this document on the Kiladar. But first you must translate it. So you had better get busy on it."

"Now you're talking," grunted Shorty. "Come on, get busy, Pete."

"But it will take a long time," I protested. "I can't simply write down the translation of a document like this. It will need careful study."

"Like hell it will! You ain't forgotten, Pete, by any

chance that I got a knife." He whipped out the horrible thing and felt its edges gloatingly. "You can't kid me, limey. You just get busy doing your stuff."

Desperately I procrastinated. Would the Motamid never come? "It's no good hustling me. I'm telling the plain truth. I shall have to make a regular study of the document, using dictionaries and reference books . . ."

Winger looked narrowly at me with a searching look. "You had better not try any monkey tricks, Vallender. You are in on this with us, whether you like it or not."

"Don't be an ass!" I protested. "Look here, Winger, you aren't a thick-skulled nitwit like Shorty. You must realize that deciphering a document like this is a long business."

"How long?"

"I can't possibly say. How can I?"

"One day?"

"I tell you I can't say."

"Very well. Get together what books and papers you want. Look slippy. Go with him, Shorty."

My heart sank like a stone. I wanted at all costs to avoid having to go away with the men before the Motamid came with help. He was my only hope. If I were taken away, I might as well give myself up for lost. I made one more effort to delay matters.

"You are asking an impossibility. I am not an expert in these things. I shall want help from a Pundit I know in Barwara City. Some of the characters are archaic . . ."

"Just help him to get busy, Shorty," snarled Winger.

"Sure, sure. Come on, limey, let's go." The ruffian made as though to prod me with his knife.

"You blundering fool!" I cried in a rage. "You'll spoil everything. I tell you I shan't be able to translate the document if I can't have access to every kind of help. Suppose I have to tell you I can't get on with the job?"

" Well, that would be just too bad, limey. Just too bad. Come on now! Get moving! "

Urged by Shorty, I was compelled to get together as many books and papers as I could and pack them hurriedly in a parcel. Then the men shouted for Donovan and told him to bring the camels, including my own. With a gleam of hope I thought that Boota Singh would refuse, would organize a rescue, would do something. And then I remembered that Boota Singh was not there and that only an ignorant substitute was in charge who would unquestionably obey Donovan. There was no hope of rescue. The peaceable inhabitants of our little settlement did not even know that I was being kidnapped. And even if they had known, they would have been powerless, unarmed as they were except for the comic muskets of the State guard. I sickened at the idea of my people being shot down mercilessly if they resisted.

Perhaps it would have been better if I had made a fight for it and trusted to something turning up. But Shorty kept close behind me with his knife handy, and I was intimidated into silence. It was not long before we rode away towards the Hills. My last impression of the Camp was the sight of Abdul standing on the verandah staring after us and flicking imaginary dust with his duster, not with his well-known gesture of annoyance, but uncertainly and unhappily as though he knew that there was something badly wrong.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WINGER rode in front on his camel, bumping awkwardly on the rear saddle. I came next and Shorty brought up the rear. I tried to think out a plan of some sort, but I could think of nothing that I could do. There might be some chance of action when we dismounted from the camels and took to the hill paths where the huge beasts would have to be left behind. But I did not feel very hopeful as I was no match for two armed men. All I could think of was to delay things as much as possible.

My protestations about not being able to decipher the Sanskrit document were genuine enough. It was written in very crabbed writing and I had not been able to gather much from a first examination under somewhat flustering circumstances, to put it mildly. It was a curious manuscript and I had not been far wrong in describing it as more like a horoscope than anything else. There were undoubted references to the sun and moon and planets, with a number of cabalistic signs which might turn out to be mathematical symbols. The ancient Hindus were far ahead of the rest of the world in mathematical knowledge, especially of algebra, and I had among my books a brochure on their notation which might prove useful. Of course Winger believed that the document was simply a plan giving directions to find the Treasure chamber. But I felt pretty sure that it was nothing of the kind. It was something quite different. The four mantras that enclosed the document as in a frame told me that. It must be a thing of tremendous religious potency that would be surrounded by the mantras of the Four Elementals.

I doubted whether I had sufficient knowledge to arrive at its significance, for I was only an amateur in such matters and could not pretend to be an expert. No doubt the Pundit I had mentioned as living in Barwara City would be able to determine the character of the strange parchment, but I saw no hope of getting in touch with him.

I contemplated unhappily what Winger and Shorty would do when I explained to them that the Sanskrit document would be of no use to them in their interview with the Kiladar. I was still more unhappy at the idea that they would not be able to get into touch with the Kiladar, who would merely be puzzled by their message that they brought news from his son. I feared that they would disbelieve me all round and accuse me not only of misinterpreting their words, but also of pretended failure to decipher the document. Then they would vent their rage and disappointment on me . . . and I shuddered at that.

So it was in silent misery that I rode between Winger and Shorty in single file. Once when the camels bunched at an awkward turn in the track I asked where we were going.

"To our Camp, of course. We'll make you comfortable enough."

"Sure!" remarked Shorty with his insufferable grin of superiority. "Though we don't run a dude Camp like you. Huh!"

The jog-trot was resumed and we strung out into single file again. Soon we were traversing the newly cleared track towards where I had first met the two Americans. There was no sign of Donovan anywhere, and I thought that he must have been left behind in my Camp as being of no further use. But on second thoughts I dismissed this as unlikely. Donovan was one of the gang and he would not be allowed to remain where he liked. But he was such a hopelessly unreliable

creature that I could not understand why Winger still made use of him. I should have thought that the Americans would have thrown him out or have put him out of the way long before now.

At the place where the jungle path branched off from the cleared survey track we halted and I was told to dismount. A wild idea of making a dash for it came into my head, only to be abandoned at once when a strong party of hillmen suddenly emerged from concealment. They were evidently expecting us, and I dare say they were the same men whom I had seen from my eyrie among the rocks when I had spied upon the gangsters and Donovan. They were of the type called 'forest folk' in the ancient Hindu scriptures, and were obviously direct descendants of the coal-black aborigines who inhabited India before the Aryan invasions of many thousands of years ago. As I looked at their flat, ugly faces I did not wonder that they were held in fear and abomination by the highly civilized Hindus.

In a daunting silence they unloaded the camels of the scanty baggage they were carrying. My parcel of books and papers was the bulkiest of the packages. The man who had been on the back saddle of the Jabberwock, where Boota Singh usually rode, was one of my own people, and I determined to try and send a message back by him. He was only a substitute whom Boota Singh sometimes sent out with me when he could not come himself. He was not a very intelligent individual, but I thought he might take a message if only I could give it to him. A written message was out of the question, but I might send a verbal one. The camel man was glancing at the hillmen with undisguised horror, and it had evidently penetrated his dull brain that something out of the way was afoot. He spoke to me as soon as the Jabberwock was off-loaded.

"Huzoor, may I go?" He was obviously longing to get away from the terrifying presence of the little black

men whom he looked upon almost as demons from another world.

Winger looked round suspiciously. "What's he say?"

"He wants to go back to Camp. Shall I tell him to go?"

"No. He must stay with the other camels."

"But . . ."

"It's no use, limey," put in Shorty. "We ain't children. You just do what you are told. Tell that nigger he has to stay here with the others."

The Jabberwock here joined the conversation by uttering a howl of rage. He had been protesting camel-fashion from time to time, and now he took the law into his own hands by standing up before he was told and trying to head for home. The camel man had the nose rope firmly in his hand and the Jabberwock circled round, roaring lustily at being prevented from making off, and it was some time before peace was restored and the Jabberwock subsided into indignant snorts and burbles. As soon as he could make himself heard above the uproar, Winger told me to tell my man to wait with the other camels.

"And cut it short, Vallender. Don't try to tell him anything else."

"Why can't he go back?" I asked. "He is of no importance."

"He's going to do what I tell him," snapped Winger. "You just tell him to go with the other camel men."

I was about to carry out this order when the man decided things for himself. As I have said, he was glancing about him with undisguised fear. I am sure he did not understand a word of English, but he must have gathered what was up. It all happened so quickly that Winger and Shorty had no time to do anything. The Jabberwock was straining at the nose rope, trying to make for home, and the camel man suddenly gave the

hairy beast its head. The Jabberwock needed no encouragement. With a satisfied snort he started off with the man running alongside. Terror lent him wings, and he managed to scramble up into the saddle where he stoutly belaboured the camel's sides.

"Hey . . . !" shouted Shorty, but it was too late. He fired repeatedly at the swaying camel, but it was a tricky mark and the brute was well on its way before the first shot started all the peacocks in the jungle screaming. Neither the camel nor the man was hit and they were soon out of range. Shorty rushed to his own camel to go in pursuit, but it was frightened by the firing and it was wellnigh uncontrollable so that Shorty gave up the idea of going after the Jabberwock and vented his feelings in shouting curses until Winger told him to shut his mouth.

"You blundering fool!" cried Winger savagely.

"Why did you let that nigger get away?"

Shorty came up to me blazing with fury. "It's your doing, you blank blank blank!" he howled.

"No, it isn't," contradicted Winger. "Vallender didn't say a word to him."

"Yes, he did, the bloody blankety . . ." Shorty used a lot of queer American oaths which I could hardly understand.

"It's no use talking," shouted Winger. "What are we to do? That nigger will raise hell."

"Hell! I'll give him all the hell he needs when I get hold of him . . ."

"For God's sake, shut your mouth! I dare say things aren't so bad. We must act quickly, that's all. He won't be able to tell much more than they are already suspecting about us. And whom will he tell? If you hadn't started firing at him I dare say no one would listen to him. But you always were a fool and always will be."

"If I had pumped lead into him in time . . ."

"Come on! Let's go! I dare say things aren't too bad if we move quickly."

The hillmen seemed to know what to do and they followed us when we set off along the path into the Hills. We soon got beyond the place where I had penetrated a few days before and the track eased off considerably, so that we made rapid progress. We three white men went in front and the little black men fell in behind. We moved at a good pace, but the path was well shaded by the stunted jungle trees which clung to the rocky soil and I found it easy enough to keep up.

"How far is it to your Camp?" I asked.

Shorty only grunted, but Winger replied. "About three miles, I should say."

"Have you camped near to Rantumpur Fort?"

"Not far off."

"Are we going to the Fort?"

"Yes, after reaching Camp. The sooner the better."

Winger returned laconic answers to other questions that I put to him, but I did not glean much information. Winger was disturbed by the escape of the Jabberwock and was afraid that the State authorities might take action now that there would be a report of Shorty having fired at the camel man. He asked me one or two questions about the sort of police force that was maintained in Sanganir State, but I could give him very little information so I pretended ignorance, but managed to convey that there was a body of armed police available somewhere. I was glad to note that this gave him further cause for anxiety.

Mostly, however, we tramped along in silence. Shorty gradually recovered from his fit of rage and resumed his insolent attitude of contempt towards me. Once or twice he asked me sarcastically if I was feeling tired, making a disparaging allusion to dude camps and soft sissies who lived in them. But I did not reply, and he gave up the sport of baiting me after a time, though his

back and shoulders as he swaggered along in front were eloquent of his great satisfaction with himself.

Winger was not far wrong when he said that we should reach his Camp in about an hour. We came to a clearing in the jungle where a few tents were pitched, and Winger led me across the open ground to his tent.

"Come in, Vallender. As Shorty says it is not so comfortable as your bungalow, but it's good enough for us."

There was little in the way of furniture, and that was only flimsy camp stuff. The two men lived under rather Spartan conditions, and they had no servants. Shorty began to cook something over the fire near the other tent, and I could not help admiring the way in which the men were able to look after themselves, though I should have hated that mode of existence. I was glad to be relieved of Shorty's company for his overbearing insolence was most exasperating. Winger was much more civil, and he put me into a camp chair and sat down on the bed alongside me.

"Look here, Vallender! It's a pity we can't work together. Let's have a go at that plan."

"I have already told you that I don't think it is what you imagine it to be."

Winger looked at me with a confidential air and lowered his voice. "I guess you didn't believe a word of that story I told you about how we got hold of the plan. Eh? You're no fool—like Shorty is."

"Well, it was a bit thin in places. The bit about a letter of credit—or whatever you called it—on the Kiladar of Rantumpur did not sound right," I answered cautiously.

"Sure! It sounded phoney to me while I was telling it to you. I got tired of my own yarn, honest I did. I could see you thought it was punk."

"Was it Shorty's idea?" I asked sarcastically.

"Well, no—not exactly. Though it was bad enough to have been."

"And Williamsville University." I went on, "that sounded phoney too."

"Sure, sure. I see it's no good trying to fool you. You know you and I ought to get together over this affair. Why not?" He spoke in an undertone as though he did not wish Shorty to hear.

"You might tell me what the affair is. You kidnap me after threatening me with all sorts of beastliness unless I do what you want in the way of interpreting for you and deciphering the plan. Do you expect me to accept all this amiably without protest? I know I am in your power at the moment. But you are also in my power to some extent. You will have to trust me. How do you know that I shall interpret correctly for you? How do you know that I shall give you the correct translation of this document?"

Winger nodded. "Exactly, Vallender. I said you were no fool. How do I know? Ask Shorty the same question!"

"Thanks! I'd rather not. His answer would be the threat of violence—or torture, if I played any monkey tricks. But how would he know I was playing tricks? It seems to me that I hold the best cards in the game." I spoke with a confidence that I did not feel by any means. But Winger hunched himself closer to me and spoke even more quietly.

"I don't deny it," he said with an air of candour. "We were bloody fools to have come here without our own interpreter. We ought to have brought Singh with us. But that damfool Shorty is too free with his gun . . ." Winger fixed me with a limpid eye full of frank admission of error. "I'm sure you have noticed that I'm none too happy about Shorty. He's the wrong man for the job. He's got no brains—not so much as you would notice unless you looked very carefully." John P. Winger raised a speculative eyebrow. "Now if I had a partner with your brains, Vallender . . ."

So the creature was trying to double-cross Shorty! So that was the explanation of the way in which he had checked Shorty's hostility to me and defended me from him once or twice! So this was how I was to be induced to run straight in the matter of interpreting with the Kiladar! My gorge rose at the nasty revelation of treachery and trickiness displayed by Winger. But the notion that the two men might quarrel and fall out raised a faint hope in my mind. I thought quickly and decided to give a slight indication of readiness to listen to Winger's tempting.

"I've said once or twice before that you must talk more plainly," I replied in a hushed voice. "I'll say more. I should be glad of a chance of getting even with Shorty. I don't like his contemptuous manner with me."

"Sure! Though it's only his way of keeping his own spirits up. Shorty has had one or two frights, and he is afraid I shall think he is losing his nerve. So he has to bluster and brag to show his superiority. You need not take much notice of that."

"All the same I don't like it," I repeated. It seemed a good line to take, and since it was quite true it came easily. Winger swallowed the bait.

"I understand," he nodded sagely. "He tries it on with me sometimes. I don't like it either. That's another reason why you and I should work together, eh?"

"Look here, Winger, you keep throwing hints out about working together. I wish you would talk plainly. I can't see that I have any other choice. If I refuse to help and defy you, well . . . I suppose you would use methods of compulsion."

"Don't let's talk of that, Vallender. I know we must appear to you as a couple of crooks who won't stick at anything to get our way—and I dare say that isn't far wrong. But I don't like violence. Shorty does. That's

one of the main differences between us. No, I would rather get my way peaceable, if I can. If not . . . well, as I say, we needn't talk about that."

"Go on."

"It isn't as if I wanted to ask you to do anything wrong. I know you wouldn't do that. You Britishers are queer. You've got old traditional ideas fixed deep in you. I don't say it isn't a fine thing to have an old tradition. Yes, Sir, there is much to admire about it, and I'm ready to respect your feelings." I was a bit puzzled by this transparent flattery, wondering what it was leading up to. Winger did not leave me long in doubt. "Do you know anything about the law regarding finding treasure?"

"Treasure trove?" I said.

"Yeah! That's it. Treasure trove! I had forgotten what it was called in England. Now isn't that a fine old feudal expression?" Winger's acting was magnificent.

"Treasure trove in England belongs to the Crown," I said. "Though its value is usually handed back to the finder."

"Sure! That's fine! Maybe there are a lot of forms to be filled up and deposited in the Tower of London. But the finder gets the value of the treasure—that's the plain English of it. So he might as well save himself the trouble of filling up the forms. I know, I know . . . you needn't tell me. You are a law-abiding Britisher and you would do what the law requires. But an American might not worry, eh? And if the treasure was not in England, but here in Sangarir, you wouldn't blame him too much if he forgot to find out whether he had to . . . well, you wouldn't blame him if he just helped himself and no one the wiser."

I acted the part of illumination breaking in on me. "So that's what it's all about! Why on earth didn't you tell me before? Why all the mystery? Buried treasure! And you have got a clue to it?"

"Sure! "

"Then all that yarn about Ranjit Singh . . ."

"It wasn't all poppycock. No, Sir. He gave us the plan right enough. It is legally ours. Mine, I ought to say. Shorty has no legal claim on it. He could be cut right out, if you like. It could be ours all right—I mean yours and mine. We could go half shares in anything we find. And if Singh wasn't romancing, a half share means something pretty big. You see, I'm putting all my cards on the table. Why not? It's no use pretending I'm not dependent on you because of the language difficulty. If you'll come in . . ."

"Wait a minute," I protested. "How will you manage to leave Shorty out? He will object strongly."

For an instant an evil little devil peeped out of a corner of Winger's candid eye. "You can leave that to me. Yes, Sir. I'll handle Shorty, if he gives trouble." It gave me cold shivers down the spine to hear him say this. The murdering of Shorty as soon as it became desirable meant nothing to this devil Winger. Nor would the murder of myself give him the slightest qualm as soon as he had picked my brains of all that he required. I saw how necessary it was to keep him on tenterhooks regarding the deciphering of the plan, although I still believed that the document was not a clue to the Treasure. He spoke of this at once as though he had read my mind. "So you see, Vallender, the first step is to learn all we can about the location of the Treasure. I think you are wrong about the plan. Singh was quite explicit. He said that we were to show it to the Kiladar of Rantumpur and that it contained a clear guide to the Treasure chamber. . . ."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Do you mean that the document is an order to the Kiladar to show us politely to the Treasure chamber and ask us to help ourselves? "

"Why, not exactly that, I guess. But Singh said that

the Kiladar would receive us in a friendly way, and that we should be able to cash in on him for a considerable sum."

I hesitated. This statement sounded so improbable, and even ridiculous, that I wondered whether Winger was once again spinning a yarn. He saw my hesitation and repeated the substance of what he had said.

"It seemed all right way back home in Chi . . . in Williamsville. But I'll own that it don't seem so easy here in Sanganir. No, Sir, I'll say it don't seem the same thing as it did. But Singh was positive enough. Shorty will bear me out. He was there and he is certain that Singh was telling the truth, though it took some getting out of him."

"I thought you said that Ranjit Singh was anxious to show his gratitude."

"Sure, sure! That's what I said. But he didn't want to reveal an old family secret—not at first. But Shorty managed to persuade him. He kept repeating that we must show the letter, or plan or whatever it is, to the Kiladar of Rantumpur and that we could then use our own wits to get hold of the Treasure. He said that the Kiladar would not oppose us if we showed him this queer bit of parchment. I thought it sounded phoney at first, but Singh convinced me at last."

"It was a mistake not to have brought Ranjit Singh with you."

"Of course it was. But that fool Shorty . . . well, never mind him. We can leave him out. He can be got rid of as soon as we have no further use for him. I won't deny he is useful in the camp. He can cook. It's about all he is good for. 'Sh. Here he comes. Pretend you have been trying to decipher the document."

Together we bent over the stained piece of paper with its odd-looking characters and mathematical signs, while I opened my Sanskrit dictionary at random. We made a convincing picture, and Shorty's satisfaction with

himself rendered him unsuspecting that Winger was already plotting against him.

"Lobscouse," announced Shorty in an explanatory voice. "Ain't never heard of it, limey? It's a dish I learned to make aboard a tanker I once went for a voyage on. Travelled about on tramp steamers for six months, I did."

"For your health?" I inquired politely.

"Yeah! You've said it. Huh!" He darted a look of sudden suspicion at me as it penetrated his dull brain that I might be poking fun at him. "Hey! Getting fresh, eh? Wise guy, huh!"

The creature slopped down tin enamel plates in front of each of us and ladled out a liberal helping of the stew. It smelt good and I was glad of it, for I had made a poor breakfast and I was hungry in spite of all that I was having to go through.

"Found out what's in the letter?"

"Don't worry Vallender," put in Winger. "It's going to be a long business. It isn't a traveller's cheque issued by the American Express."

"Sure! I ain't in no hurry, John, if you ain't. Though that damned nigger who escaped will bring the whole British Army around us. Still if you are satisfied, it don't matter a row of pins what I say."

"Don't talk like a fool, Shorty. This is a Native State and there is no British Army anywhere near here."

"O.K. What you say goes," answered Shorty with a smirk of superior knowledge. "If you are going to let a damfool haw-haw Britisher outwit you, don't mind me."

"You seem to think that translating Sanskrit is like reading any other language."

"Well, so it is. Why don't he read out loud what's in the paper? I'd soon make him find his tongue."

"Like you did to Singh, eh? He was just on the point of telling us when you . . ."

"Now don't bring that up, John. I dare say I was

a bit hasty. But the damned nigger was so long in coming to the point. I didn't mean to go so far as killing him, honest I didn't. I'll be more careful with this sissy."

"Well, you'll have to wait. Vallender has decided to help us, under protest of course. He sees that it is useless trying to resist. But we must give him time to work out the meaning of the plan."

"So that's the game, eh? I always said that he was soft. Well, you'd better look slippery, limey. I'm not very patient, huh. And you are dead wrong, John. We can't give him time. We have got to work quickly now. You said so yourself."

Winger nodded. "You're right there, Shorty. We'd better be going. Though I'd rather have deciphered the plan first."

"Aw, shucks! He's read the plan already. He knows quite well what is in it. You can't fool me. Reading is easy—if you know how. Look at me. I can read English, can't I? I just look at a bit of writing and I read it—just like that. There ain't nothing more to it. If I could read this lingo here, it would be just the same. Don't let this Britisher fool you. He knows what's in it all right. Come on! Let's go! What are we waiting for? I'll make the limey talk when the time comes."

"I believe you are right, Shorty. We had better be going. Though I think you are not being fair to Vallender. He is doing his best. Aren't you?" He shot the question at me with a meaning look.

"Of course," I said, only too anxious to put Shorty off the idea of persuading me to more rapid action. "I can translate the four mantras of the Elemental Powers at once if you like. I have seen them before. They are believed to have strong magical potency."

"Magic! Huh! Boloney! I once knew a magician in Chicago. Well, what's in them?"

I translated slowly. The first three were those for protection against the Elementals of Fire, Earth and Pestilence. Winger listened carefully in case the words contained some clue to the Treasure. But he was, of course, disappointed.

"Can you beat it?" grunted Shorty. "Magic! Well if that's magic I can't say I see much in it."

I translated the fourth mantra—the one directed against an enemy. There was a longish silence when I finished my version of the couplet.

"I'm afraid my translation is not so well expressed as the original," I said. "The Sanskrit language sounds much more impressive. It sounds much more menacing. It is a sort of curse."

"I'll say it is," muttered Shorty.

"Against whom is the curse directed?" asked Winger.

"Against the enemies of the family that owns this document," I explained.

"How does it run?" asked Winger. "Tell me again."

"Something like this," I said, trying to give a more picturesque translation. "It says:

'Who dare despoil the Children of the Sun and
Moon,
May they be devoured by that which they most
fear.'"

"It doesn't make sense," declared Shorty. "Come on, John. Let's go. Magic, huh? Children of the Sun and Moon! Who are they anyway? Never met them."

"What do you think it means, Vallender?" asked Winger thoughtfully.

"I couldn't say. It sounds pretty bald in English. Let me read it to you in Sanskrit." I did so, rolling out the thunderous hexameters as dramatically as I could.

"'Devoured by that which they most do fear,'"

repeated Winger in a wondering voice. "What would that mean?"

"Nothing!" growled Shorty. "I ain't afraid of anyone or anything, so that lets me out of the curse. What about you, John? What are you afraid of?"

"Plenty. Your thick-headed blundering, for one thing."

"Hey! Take it easy, John. You wouldn't be thinking I would do you any harm?" Shorty grinned amiably at his partner. "We got to work together, you and I. Come on! You can bring the curse along with you and we'll try it on the Kiladar. Magic! I know the kind of magic that will work on the Kiladar, once we can get into touch with him. Your limey can do the trick or else I'll knock sense into him. Come on!"

Shorty kept on impatiently exhorting us to come on, and it was not long before we started off. During one of Shorty's momentary absences Winger conveyed to me in a conspiratorial voice that I had better make some kind of a protest at being taken to the Fort against my will, so I grumbled and hung back until Shorty gratified himself by uttering a number of blood-curdling threats as to what would happen if I didn't make up my mind pretty quickly. I then acquiesced very unwillingly, and Shorty was good enough to express satisfaction in his most offensively superior manner.

"Yaller! All limeys is yaller," he observed pleasantly. "It's just as well you are yaller, limey. Things might be just too bad if you weren't. Just too bad," he repeated with a ferocious intonation.

We started off in much the same formation as that in which we had arrived at the Americans' Camp. That is to say, we three white men went in front and the hillmen followed. I asked how far it was to the Fort.

"About a mile," answered Winger. "It is in the valley the other side of that ridge. The path runs over

the top of the ridge. You'll see the Fort when we get to the top."

"You have been there before?"

"Yeah. I told you. But it was all shut up and no one answered. There is a big wooden gate covered with iron spikes sticking out of it."

"That is meant to prevent an enemy from using elephants to batter down the gate," I explained.

"Is that so? Well, they are wasted on us. We aren't going to use elephants, are we, Shorty?"

"Hey? What's that?"

"It's a pity, though. Otherwise we might have got Shorty to ram his thick skull at the gate. I'll bet the gate would have gone down like matchwood."

"Getting fresh, huh!" muttered Shorty in a disgruntled voice. It was evident that he was curiously touchy about being labelled as the intellectual inferior to Winger. Like all stupid men he tried to keep his end up by a boastful and noisy way of talking. He lapsed into an offended silence and we did not talk much as we tramped along a well-marked path. The way soon led uphill towards the summit of the rocky ridge that Winger had pointed out. It was neither high nor very steep, but the ridge stood boldly above the stunted trees of the interminable jungle that clothed the Hills. The hillmen streamed along with us, using a dozen tracks through the trees and undergrowth that we should have found it difficult to see, let alone to use. The little men were all round us, and when we reached the top most of them were already there, pointing and jabbering among themselves. We came out on to the ridge where a slight breeze cooled us while I took in the magnificent sight of Rantumpur Fort.

It stood squarely on the top of a huge lump of rock nearly half a mile long but much narrower, so that in places it can only have been a hundred yards wide. The lump of rock—I hardly know how else to describe it—

rose a few hundred feet above the level of the broad valley which was covered with trees and jungle. The whole circumference of the rock was protected by a high wall of red sandstone standing up grimly sheer from the rock. The wall was broken by hundreds of bastions, casemates, and crenellated turrets, while the skyline was serrated into an intricate pattern of canopied sentry posts, towers, and massive masonry buildings of formidable strength. There seemed to be no way up to the Fort, but I knew what these Rajputana forts were like since they had a strong resemblance to one another. So I felt sure that there would be a heavily fortified way down from the summit of the rocky table with a massive gateway at ground level surrounded by curtain works. But it was out of sight from where we stood recovering our breath after the scramble to the top of the ridge, so that the famous Fort of Rantumpur gave a tremendous impression of inaccessibility and strength. It stood lonely and impregnable, rather like an immense battleship at anchor amid a sea of jungle. The great circular bastions looked like turrets from which the muzzles of guns should protrude while the high-piled buildings at the centre of the Fort's length might well have been the conning-tower and control station of the whole.

I was so lost in admiration of the magnificent spectacle that I did not notice that there was something unusual happening. The hillmen had been jabbering among themselves, and suddenly there was a crescendo of shouting and they began to stream towards where Shorty and Winger stood. In a moment we were surrounded by a crowd of excited little black men all talking at once and waving their skinny arms. It was in vain that Shorty tried to bluster and shout. He only succeeded in adding to the tumult. It was obvious that the men were frightened of something, for many of them kept pointing at the Fort standing grimly squat on its plateau of rock. I could not catch what they were saying, and of

course the Americans did not understand a word of what was being voiced by a dozen tongues.

"Hey! What's it all about?" bellowed Shorty. "This ain't a revival meeting. Can't one of you say something sensible? Cut it right out," he shouted louder, "and get on your way. Damned lot of niggers! Get on there! Get moving!" His infuriated gestures made his meaning clear and there was a fresh outcry. The puny hillmen broke away and came running to where I sat on a knob of limestone.

"Sahib!" they shouted. "We are poor men. We do not wish to die." And a lot more in the same strain. I stood up and tried to calm them, with some success, for the shouting diminished and Winger managed to make himself heard.

"What's up? What's it all about?" he shouted at me.

"They say they won't go any farther," I shouted back above the uproar.

"What's that?" blustered Shorty. "I'll handle this. Damned lot of niggers!" He made as if to seize one of them and the noise grew louder than ever. The little men shrank back obviously terrified and Winger savagely shouted at Shorty to pipe down.

"Ask them what's eating them," he said to me, and I held up my hand for silence. When I was able to make myself heard I told them to let one man speak for them. After a brief pause an elder was pushed forward and we salaamed to one another.

"Do you speak for the rest?" I asked.

"Assuredly. We are poor men. We will go no farther . . ." The rest of what he said was drowned in a resumption of shouting and I had to get them to quiet down once more.

"What are they saying?" asked Winger suspiciously.

"What I told you. They won't go on. You had better let me talk to them for a bit. It's no good shouting at them. I will try and find out why they won't

go on." Winger frowned, but he did not interfere when I led the old man on to talk more freely. This he did when I had got matters on to an easier footing, and soon I had induced the hillmen to squat on the ground in a close semicircle. I even perpetrated a mild joke or two and got them grinning uneasily, and soon it was possible to raise the matter of continuing as escort. On this point they were adamant.

"Sahib, once before we went with the two white men to the Gate of the Fort as ordered. But we will not go again."

"Why not? Are you not paid well enough?"

"It is no matter of pay. If we go again we shall die."

"Nonsense! Why should you die?"

The reply was shattering. "Because of what is written on the paper."

"What paper?" I asked this knowing full well the answer. "The paper which is kept by the white man. The paper which the Sahib has read. We go no nearer to the Fort."

I tried many variants of the same question, but the answer was always the same. They would not go a step beyond the top of the ridge because of what was written in the paper. I explained this to Winger and Shorty.

"How do they know what is written in the paper?" asked Winger.

"I don't know," I answered.

"Oh, you don't know, eh?" sneered Shorty. "Maybe you didn't tell them, huh? Maybe you thought you could stop us going on by getting these niggers to walk out on us? Well, you thought wrong, limey. I'll show them!" He gave a vicious kick at the nearest hillman.

"Stop it, Shorty!" shouted Winger angrily. "Don't be a fool!"

"Fool nothing!" bawled Shorty back at him. "You leave this to me. I know how to handle them. Hey, you!" The hillmen began to scatter before Shorty's

infuriated onslaught. He made a rush like a mad bull and tried to seize one of them. The man was no match for the huge American, but he managed to wriggle free, striking out wildly as he did so. One of his frenzied gestures resulted in Shorty being struck in the eye, and the enraged gangster bellowed with fury. Before Winger could stop him he had drawn his automatic and started firing at the retreating mob of hillmen. There was a shriek of fear from them and they ran wildly for cover in the jungle, leaving two of their number lying on the ground.

"Stop it!" shouted Winger. "You bloody fool!"

"No nigger hits me in the eye," roared Shorty, "without getting hit. No, Sir! I'll show them who's boss! Come on back, you lousy little monkeys! Come on here or I'll shoot the whole lot of you!" And he went raving after the disappearing men blazing away as he went. But he might have saved his breath and his ammunition, for the hillmen had melted away. Shorty spent some time crashing round through the undergrowth below the summit like an infuriated buffalo, but in the end he had to return out of breath and already inclined to look askance at Winger who scowled on his associate like a thundercloud.

I had run to the wounded men, but I was unable to do much. One of them was dead and the other snarled at me, refusing all help. He was not badly hurt—a bullet had grazed his thigh and bowled him over with the shock—and as I turned to call to Winger to come and give me a hand, the wounded man leapt to his feet and disappeared in the jungle. It was no good trying to follow him and I had to let him go. It was at that moment that Shorty reappeared, pistol in hand.

"You filthy murderer!" I spat at him.

"Hey, what's that? Say that again!" Shorty blustered.

"You filthy murderer!" I repeated, putting addi-

tional venom into my words, for the man sickened me.

"You can't get away with that kind of talk, limey! Stick 'em up! Reach for the sky, limey! I'm going to have a little talk wid you, huh!" The hulking brute covered me with his gun and he glared at me with an inflamed visage. I thought he was going to murder me, but a change came over him. He suddenly grew silent and his massive frame seemed to deflate. I could not see what was happening, for Winger was behind me, but I soon saw.

"O.K., John," said a more subdued Shorty. "What you say goes. Sure it does. I'm only having a bit of a game with the limey. He's yaller, and it makes me laugh to see him squeal, that's all." He put his gun away, and I turned round to see Winger covering Shorty with such an expression of devilry on his face that I do not wonder that the brutal Shorty felt a qualm of fright.

"Feeling nervous, Shorty?" inquired Winger in a quiet voice.

"Sure!" replied that individual, with an attempt at being facetious. "Like hell I am! Put your gun up, John. Mebbe I was a bit hasty. But being struck in the face by a nigger . . . well, I ask you, wouldn't you have started something?"

"You blundering fool!"

"Now, John, don't get mad at me. I've said I was maybe a bit hasty. Put your hardware away, John. You don't need it with your old buddy, come now. . . ."

Winger slipped his gun into his pocket and Shorty sighed noisily. "That's right! Gee, John, you had me scared. Yes, Sir. I'll own I don't like it when you look like that. I've seen that look on your face before and it didn't look healthy for someone. I was only joking, John. I was just going to beat the limey up like you know how. Why worry about a goddam Britisher anyway? You're getting soft, John . . . now don't get mad again. I must have a little joke sometimes. . . ."

"Joke! Do you call it a joke to have us left here without an escort?"

"Well, what of it? What do we want with an escort? Come on, let's go. Better without all those niggers hanging around."

"You know what they said about the jungle, you fool!"

"Yeah, I know. So as they might get paid higher, I guess."

"Don't talk like a fool, even if you are one. This jungle is swarming with tiger and God knows what else."

"Feeling nervous, John?"

"Yes, of course. We were all right so long as we had a crowd of men to beat. How do you suppose we are to get to the Fort now?"

I listened to this with some mystification. It was evident that someone had been telling Winger and Shorty fantastic yarns about the dangers lurking in the jungle. And it was equally plain that Winger treated these tales seriously. Ridiculous though it seemed to me, I remembered what queer ideas new-comers to India often have about perils from snakes and wild animals. Winger was really uneasy about plunging into the jungle that separated us from Rantumpur Fort! It was so absurd to me that I could not help breaking into the angry talk going on between Winger and his burly companion.

"What are you grinning at, limey?" Shorty asked suddenly. "Going to make another wisecrack, huh?"

"I'm amused at your rum ideas about the jungle," I said.

"You mean there ain't no wild animals there?"

"Oh, they are there all right. But they won't worry about us at this time of day," I said. "We can walk through the jungle quite safely in broad daylight."

"Well, well," grinned Shorty. "And I said you was yaller! Come on, John! If the limey says we needn't

get scared it sure is safe enough for us."

"That's all very well, Vallender," said Winger uneasily, and I wondered again at his manner. "But we have heard the great brutes snarling round our camp. I wish we had brought our rifles."

"I'm sure you need not worry by day," I answered reassuringly, and Winger hesitated.

"I don't like it," he said.

"Aw shucks," commented Shorty.

"Couldn't we wait here and get the men to return?"

"I don't think you will ever see the men again after Shorty's crime."

"You bloody fool, Shorty, to land us in this jam."

"There ain't no jam. I ain't scared of wild animals. Come on."

"You really think it will be all right, Vallender?" Winger asked unhappily.

"Quite sure. Any tiger or panther will be lying up during the day. They won't take any notice of us as their lairs will be far from the path. If we stick to the path we shall be perfectly safe."

It took some little time to satisfy Winger, but eventually we set off down the path into the dim quiet of the jungle.

CHAPTER NINE

It was very quiet when we reached the valley. It was not far below where we had paused on the ridge—a few hundred feet perhaps—but it was enough to make a great change from the sunlit hilltop where a slight breeze was stirring to the stilly quiet half-light of the jungle. There must have been more soil in the valley, for the trees were higher and the undergrowth was thicker than usual in the Nimli Hills. The path was well marked, but our feet made never a sound as we padded silently along. I was accustomed to the restful silence of the jungle, but this was no ordinary silence. It was so dead and our voices were blanketed whenever we spoke, so that we took to speaking in an undertone. Not that we spoke much. Winger was plainly ill at ease. He marched behind me until he seemed to feel the need of companionship and closed up alongside me. Shorty swaggered ahead with a rolling swing of his shoulders and led us at a brisk pace which would compass the distance from the ridge to the Fort in some twenty minutes.

Winger chose a time when Shorty was a few yards ahead to start excusing his evident nervousness. He muttered to me in an uneasy whisper.

“Guess you think I’m behaving queer, Vallender. I feel queer, that’s why.”

“You needn’t worry,” I said. “You can see for yourself that there is no sign of animal life. They are far more afraid of us than we are of them.”

“Maybe! But I got a complex about wild animals. It was this way. When I was a kid I was taken to a zoo,

and while we were looking at a black panther in a cage it sprang at us. I got frightened and for years afterwards I used to wake screaming with nightmare. It gave me a horror of cats, big or small."

"Yes," I said consolingly, "I've heard of people having a horror of cats."

"You've said it. Queer, isn't it? So now perhaps you won't laugh at me for being careful in the jungle. That is why I had to take an escort with me. I just had to."

He lapsed into silence again and we plodded steadily on without a sound. Once Shorty stopped and turned round with a puzzled look on his brutish face.

"We ought to be there by now, I reckon," he said. "Are we on the right path? There are so many twists and turns that I've lost my sense of direction. We'll be wandering in this damned forest all day, going round in circles."

There was no sign of the huge mass of the Fort and the greenery enclosed us as in a prison. I offered no suggestions as I was not going to help the two men, though I felt sure that we were on the right track all right. I have a strong sense of direction and there was the sun to keep us properly oriented. But Winger and Shorty argued angrily for a few minutes before deciding to go on. It looked as though an open rupture between the men could not be long delayed. Winger kept on harking back to Shorty's madness in scaring the hillmen away and he called the bigger man every name he could lay his tongue to, while Shorty bellowed and blustered in reply. They were just about to start when there was a sudden crashing noise in the undergrowth close at hand and a big animal blew lustily. It sounded to me like a village buffalo scrambling to its feet and puffing its displeasure at being disturbed. It was quite harmless of course, but Winger turned positively green.

"What's that?" he gasped.

"Don't sound too good to me," grunted Shorty, peering into the leafy screen with his automatic in his hand. There were more crashes as the beast, whatever it was, lurched off. I remained unhelpfully silent as the two men stared about them, while Winger mopped an agitated brow.

"Let's go back," he quavered, and his distress astonished me more than ever. Here was a man who was without fear in a murderous fight with other gangsters and yet he was ready to beat a retreat merely at the vague fear of tiger or panther or whatever his pet aversion was. He was trembling all over, and I think it was at that moment that I began to understand the forces that were being arrayed for the defence of the threatened Treasure of Sanganir. Something of the deadly fear that Winger felt was communicated to me, so that I, too, looked uneasily round and shivered at the dead silence that encompassed us.

"It's gone!" said Shorty in a relieved voice. He was standing in a tense attitude with his useless pistol still in his hand—useless that is against any large animal. It occurred to me that he might be fool enough to fire at and wound something he saw. Then we should be in the cart, with no rifles to defend ourselves against an infuriated and terrified brute. I said as much to him and he put his weapon away slowly and with evident reluctance.

"The bullet would only wound," I said. "It would not penetrate the beast's hide any more than that scorpion's sting could get through your boot."

"Hey, what the . . . ?"

"Not with your hand, you idiot," I cried sharply, for Shorty was about to brush the evil thing away with his paw. I used the toe of my boot to knock the creature off his foot, whereupon he crushed it with a tremendous stamp. It was a big black scorpion and its sting would have been frightful agony, though not fatal by itself.

"Where there is one scorpion there are usually two," I said. "You had better move, Shorty. That spot isn't healthy."

"I'll say it isn't," he muttered, looking unhappily round. "I don't mind anything on four feet—but these creepers get me down. Gee, there it is!" Sure enough another big scorpion was advancing on Shorty with its formidable claws advanced menacingly and its poisoned sting held high ready for action. Shorty's boot put an end to its life with a horrible crunch. "C'm on!" he cried.

"I'm going back," asserted Winger.

"Going back nothing," shouted Shorty, growing noisier and noisier in order to keep up his courage. "You ain't yaller like the limey, huh?"

There was a pause, during which it seemed that Winger might get his way. But eventually he sulkily agreed to go on. The idea that we might be on the wrong path was conveniently forgotten. Both men were anxious to get away from an ill-omened place. After a minute or two of progress their courage revived and Shorty began to boast and bluster after his accustomed manner. Winger, too, lost the green tinge in his sallow cheeks and walked with a steadier pace.

"You see how it is, Vallender." He tried to laugh the matter off. "The brute gave me a horrible start. Suppose it had been a tiger, eh?" He wished me to pooh-pooh his fears, but I saw no reason to help him to regain his courage. Instead, I told him of the irresistible spring of a tiger or a panther on its prey and of the tales I had heard of the terrific power of their fore-paws in action. The green tint returned as I pictured the despair of the victim at the sight of the great beast crouching for its deadly spring.

And then the path gave a sudden twist, the jungle cleared and the Fort of Rantumpur stood up before us in all its massive strength. It had appeared lone and im-

pregnable when we looked down on it from above seeing it as a whole, but now it stood above us like a cliff so that one had to tilt one's head right back to look up at the towering heights of the titanic masonry. Great blocks of red sandstone had gone to the building of the walls. But what blocks! Each must have weighed a hundred tons or more, so that I marvelled at the skill of the ancient engineers who had raised them to such inaccessible places. It seemed incredible to me that the hand of man could have raised such mighty battlements without the aid of mechanical devices.

Winger and Shorty voiced their relief at emerging from the jungle. It did indeed give us a feeling that we had got out of an intricate maze in which we had been wandering for a long time. But there was still an odd feeling of tension in the air which the towering heights of the precipices above us did nothing to dispel. I was glad to find that the path had led us by many a twist and turn to the Main Gate whose existence I had inferred from many other Rajputana forts that I had seen. There it stood, massively squat, not two hundred yards from where we emerged from the jungle. A heavily fortified causeway ran diagonally up from the Main Gate to the level of the plateau, partly along an inclined slope and partly up long flights of stone steps. But there was no sign of life anywhere.

Winger and Shorty exclaimed with satisfaction at the sight, but Shorty looked round with a puzzled mien. "It looks different to me," he said. "The path looked different. It can't be the same one we came by last time."

"There don't seem to be another path," Winger answered. "I expect it's the same. All paths through these blasted trees are the same."

"It's the same Gate," observed Shorty.

"Of course," I put in. "There is always only the one gate to a Rajputana fort. There may be a small

postern gate. But there is sure to be only one Main Gate."

"Sure, sure! It's the same Gate. With the same spikes on it. But we came to it from a different angle last time."

We walked slowly across the open clearing in front of the Gate, but no one challenged us. Yet I was sure that we were being watched and the two men felt it too, for they muttered to one another in a hushed voice as though they feared to be overheard. Yet in itself the scene was cheerful enough—the sun shone brightly and the warm tints of the red sandstone walls were soothing to the eye. But there was something extremely daunting about the grim magnificence of the Gate which crouched on the ground with massive dignity and peered at us from a hundred loopholes.

"Time for you to do your stuff, limey," sneered Shorty. "You had better look slippy. We don't want to waste all day here."

"What do you want me to say?" I asked.

"Give them a hail in their own lingo."

It was useless to refuse so I shouted in Hindustani, but nothing answered me but the echoes of my own voice. I shouted again and again, but without result, and Shorty began to bluster that I was playing a trick on them. Winger told him to keep quiet and exhorted me to fresh efforts.

"They can't all be dead," Shorty grumbled. "How do we know what the limey is saying? He may be giving them a warning to keep under cover."

"You'll have to take that risk," I grinned at him.

"Hell! Don't you get fresh again. . . ."

"For God's sake, shut your mouth!" Winger cried angrily. "Maybe it's the sight of you that makes them keep out of sight."

"Hey! What's bitten you?"

"Oh, put a sock in it!" groaned Winger. "Why

did I ever team up with a nitwit like you. Look here, Vallender, can you think of any way of making them listen? "

" I dare say," I said. " But I'm not going to tell you what to do. You brought me here against my will and you can make me do things by threatening me. But you can't expect me to help you in any other way."

" Is that so? " asked Shorty truculently. " Now you just listen to me . . . "

Once again Winger had to reduce Shorty to silence with a stream of foul-mouthed vituperation, and I was astonished to see how the big bully Shorty allowed himself to be brow-beaten by the smaller man.

" There ain't no need to get mad at me," he protested. " I know how to handle a goddam Britisher—and a yaller one at that. I'll make him talk."

" How? "

" Now you're talking. Lemme get a hold on him . . . "

" And kill him, like you did Singh just when we were getting to the point."

" Now don't bring that up again, John. I'll own I went a bit too far. Anyone can make a mistake, can't he, without you getting mad at him. I'm sorry about Singh. I've said so before and I'll say it again. But I'll be careful with this limey. He won't stand out for long."

" I'd hate to let Shorty have his way," said Winger with a grim smile. " Isn't there anything you can suggest? "

My blood ran cold at the tone of his voice. " What can I do? " I temporized. " What is the use of shouting if they don't answer? "

" You'd better think of something, limey," grunted Shorty.

" Why don't you throw the letter over the wall? " I suggested wildly.

"Oh yeah! Try and think again."

"Wait a moment," Winger paused and then spoke again. "It's an idea," he said.

"Say! What's the great idea? To throw over the wall the only bit of evidence we've got? You're crazy, John. . . ."

"Of course not! But Vallender might read it out loud to them. It might make them show some sign of life, if what Singh told us is true. That's what we'll do. I'm sorry, Vallender, but you will have to do what you are told."

"Well, what is it? "

"Take the document and read it out loud so as they can hear."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell them that it was written in Sanskrit and that it was extremely unlikely that anyone in the Guard House would understand the dead language. But I stopped myself in time—it was no business of mine to help the two scoundrels with their scheme for getting through the Gate. Hitherto I had merely shouted that the two men brought news of the son of the Kiladar from over the dark water and, as I had expected, this had brought no response for the reason obvious to me that it would convey nothing to the Kiladar. And now I was ordered to recite the strange document in the possession of the Americans which would, I was sure, convey even less to the men in the Gate House.

Shorty uttered a blood-curdling threat of what would happen to me if I made away with or damaged the precious document, and Winger handed it to me with a confirmatory nod. "I'm sure you wouldn't do anything so foolish," he said with his thin-lipped smile.

I took the tattered parchment in my hand and advanced again to the Gate. There was no sign of life any more than there had been before when I had tried to get into communication. I took up a good position

not far from the Main Gate and shouted that I was going to read a communication. I had no expectation that anything would happen when I did so, for it was as unlikely that the Sanskrit would be understood as it was that a Greek address would rouse a response from a platoon of British infantry. I began at the top of the paper and I rolled out the Sanskrit hexameters of the first of the four Elementals of Power with my tongue in my cheek. There could be no harm in this ridiculous performance! Then I passed on to the second mantra and to the third. I was about to embark on the fourth—the one which I have called the Curse—when suddenly there came an interruption.

A figure appeared on the battlement above the Gate and he cried to me to stop. He was a Brahmin and a very fine dignified man; he was dressed in white homespun. On his brow he bore a fierce caste-mark which added to the fire that smouldered within his deep-set eyes. He held his hands on high in a gesture that reinforced his peremptory demand that I should cease my recitation of the mantras. I obeyed his demand at once, and the noble figure of the Brahmin lowered his hands which he folded in front amid his voluminous robes.

“Good for you, Vallender,” said Winger with great satisfaction. “Tell that guy to send for the Kiladar.”

I called out that the two strangers wanted to have speech with the Kiladar.

“Is it Vallender Sahib who speaks?” asked the Brahmin. He spoke in a courteous tone, unlike the fierce command he had hurled at me to stop my recitation of the fourth mantra.

“Yes,” I replied. “I am here under compulsion against my will.”

“It is known, Sahib. How came that document into your hands?”

“That is the very matter upon which the Americans wish to speak with the Kiladar.”

There was a pause at this and then the Brahmin spoke again. "I must see the paper myself," he said. "I will come down and examine it."

Winger and Shorty broke in with noisy demands to know what was being said, and I told them that the Brahmin was coming down to have a look at the document for himself.

"Come on!" said Shorty with great satisfaction. "Get ready to rush the Gate directly it is opened. We can shoot our way in. . . ."

"Don't be a fool! This wants careful handling. It looks as if Singh told us the truth and his letter is going to do the trick."

"Careful nothing!" bawled Shorty. "These niggers ain't no use. Once we get in, I'll soon find a way of making one of them talk. We'll get our hands on the sparklers right now. I'm tired of all your palaver, John—honest I am. Here's a chance to go in and collect and you want more talk. I'm telling you . . . Hey! What the heck . . . ?"

No wonder Shorty cut his truculence short. Some unheard signal must have been given, for with a sudden movement a large number of armed men emerged from cover behind the walls and showed themselves at a dozen places along the walls. They were armed with the usual matchlock muskets and they covered Winger and Shorty with their clumsy weapons. The sight of them had silenced the talkative Shorty effectively. Simultaneously a small postern in the Main Gate opened and the Brahmin stepped forth boldly, walking straight towards us with a firm tread. He spoke to me and not to Winger or Shorty.

"Forgive the show of force, Sahib. I deemed it wise."

"Say!" cried Shorty indignantly, finding his tongue again. "What's the great idea? Here we are, all friendly and peaceable. What's this guy want to go and call out his army for? Gee! What an army! Come

on, Winger. Let's shoot our way in. They couldn't hit a haystack. I'll knock this guy on the head . . ."

"I don't advise it, Mr. Potts," said the Brahmin in excellent English. "Those matchlocks are murderous weapons at short range. They are loaded with gunpowder and filled to the muzzle with all sorts of ammunition—pebbles, rusty nails, and so on. If you knock me on the head, they will open fire at once."

This time Shorty was completely silenced and he stared at the Brahmin with open mouth, his slow wits utterly unable to take in this new development. To put it mildly, Winger and I were dumbfounded too, but I quickly recovered. I was so tremendously relieved at this quick change in my position from one of virtual captivity to one of freedom that I could not help laughing.

"Many thanks!" I cried happily. "Now I can go free and you can dispose of the men as you wish. It has been hateful having to be compelled to do what they told me." I laughed again, for it seemed that here was the end of this bizarre adventure. Nothing remained to be done but to arrest the two gangsters. So little did I understand the way in which the forces of evil released by Winger and Shorty were working for their destruction! How could I understand with my Western mind running on such banal things as arrest and deportation? It is not on such platitudinous lines that outraged gods determine the fate of those who offend against the children of the Sun!

Winger was also quick to recover his equanimity. "Well now, that's fine," he ejaculated. "I don't say we had to be rather high-handed with Mr. Vallender, who was convinced we were up to no good. But let's forget all that."

"Say . . ." began Shorty in a strangled voice. But he did not seem able to think of how to go on so he lapsed into an unaccustomed silence.

"May I see the remarkable document from which Mr. Vallender was reading?" asked the Brahmin.

"What's your name?" asked Winger.

"My name? It is of no importance. It is Indra Dass."

Indra Dass! The Servant of Indra, that is what it meant. I looked quickly at the Brahmin, but he was smiling blandly at Winger.

"Well now, Mr. Dass, I sure would like you to have a look at it, but . . ."

"But you are afraid that I should take it and destroy it. That is what you are thinking."

"Sure!" said Shorty. "Don't let him have it."

"All the same, Mr. Winger," went on the Brahmin, "I think it is advisable to let me see it. It may make all the difference. If it is what I imagine it to be, it may be an authority on which I should be compelled to act. Otherwise I shall withdraw into the Fort and you will be powerless."

"Powerless!" bawled Shorty. "You can't put that one across." He produced his automatic and covered the Brahmin. "Now perhaps you will talk sense, huh?"

"I should be very careful, if I were you, Mr. Potts."

"Careful! What the heck! I ain't afraid of your catchemaliveohs."

"I was not referring to them. I was thinking of the scorpion which is crawling up your left boot."

"Cripes!" ejaculated Shorty. He tried to kick the evil thing away with his other foot, but the scorpion was curiously persistent. It even crawled higher up Shorty's leg before he succeeded in dislodging it and crushing it with his heavy boot. He looked round uneasily.

"Where's the other one?" he muttered, all his self-assured bluster gone once more.

"It will not be far away, Mr. Potts. I should keep a sharp look-out, if I were you."

"Creepers! The place is alive with them. . . ."

Indra Dass took the paper that Winger handed him and read it with an expressionless face. It did not take him long. Then he gave it back to the American with a courteous bow.

"Thank you, Mr. Winger. I appreciate the confidence you placed in me."

"Well?" replied the man, "what do we do now? What does the letter say?"

"It is not a letter, Mr. Winger. Not an ordinary letter, I mean. But it conveys certain instructions."

"To let us into the Fort?"

"Yes, in a way."

Winger turned a glance of triumph on Shorty, and the big man pushed his hat back on his head with a puzzled air. He was still looking apprehensively round for another scorpion, but he managed to mutter, "Can you beat it?" with a bewildered expression.

"Are we to go in now?" asked Winger eagerly. "Does that thing give you authority to admit us . . . I mean, Singh told us that it would give us free passage . . ."

"You wish to ask whether you will be admitted to the Treasure House?"

"Yeah. Now you are talking," burst in Shorty with a grin.

"I can answer that at once. You will be admitted."

"C'm ahn!" ejaculated Shorty. It was a favourite speech of his and I was very tired of it.

"I am sorry, gentlemen," said Indra Dass. "But I must keep you waiting until proper arrangements have been made to receive such distinguished guests and to provide for their entertainment."

"Look here," I broke in, "these men are criminals. You surely won't admit them to the Fort. They are dangerous criminals who won't stop at shooting down everyone who gets between them and the Treasure House."

Winger turned an evil look on me. "I think it is a

pity you said that, Vallender. Will you kindly keep out of this affair? You have done your job. Now you can get out . . . and I think you had better stay out."

"Found your courage, limey, now that you have gotten an army of catchemaliveohs behind you?" sneered Shorty. "But John P. Winger don't forget things easily. You had better watch your step."

"Better watch yours, Shorty."

"Hey!" he exclaimed with a hasty look round. "There ain't nothing there."

"Feeling nervous, Shorty?"

"Getting fresh, limey?"

"For God's sake, shut your trap," shouted Winger. He again addressed the Brahmin. "When can we go in?"

"This evening at sunset. I suggest you go back to your Camp and return then."

"Don't do it, Indra Dass," I counselled. "Why don't you arrest these men? They killed a man. Isn't that enough to enable the State authorities to move?" It seemed so absurd to me that the Brahmin should go on treating with the men. It was an anti-climax, a silly prolongation of the adventure beyond the point where it ought to fizzle out. I protested again and again, so little did I realize that the affair was indeed far other than I had imagined. If I had been able to decipher the strange document with its magical symbols, I might have understood. But perhaps it was beyond the comprehension of a Western mind to grasp the significance of the forces that now held us all in their grip. So I continued to urge the detention of the two men while Indra Dass smiled blandly at me.

"Mr. Vallender, I do not wish to treat you with discourtesy. I do not reject your advice without reason."

"Reason! Bosh!"

"Well, perhaps you are right and I act without

reason. It might be better if I said that there were stronger forces than reason. The Authority of the document which Ranjit Singh gave to these men is one which I dare not disobey."

I gave it up. "What about the Kiladar?" I said heatedly. "He is the custodian of the Treasure House. Suppose he overrules you? What then?"

"The Kiladar? I am a Brahmin. How can he overrule me in a matter of religion?" He spoke with all the arrogant pride of the highest caste. And even then I failed to perceive what was afoot. I was very blind, but I was still obsessed with the idea that the two Americans had succeeded in forcing Ranjit Singh to give them an order to the custodian of the Treasure House of Sangar to hand over a substantial sum of money or its equivalent. What an idea! I ought never to have entertained it for a moment, although I think it is fair to say that I had always sensed that there was something—well, something phoney, as Shorty would have said, about the whole thing. It never occurred to me that the degenerate scion of a noble race might in the midst of his dying agony have conceived a frightful plan of revenge, horrible and satisfying, even though he might not live to see its accomplishment.

Shorty was evidently ill-satisfied with the notion of further delay and Winger, too, was doubtful. Indra Dass read their thoughts.

"You have no choice, gentlemen. On the one hand Mr. Potts' plan of shooting your way into the Fort cannot possibly succeed, though you can, of course, murder me without difficulty. My life is nothing to you. Nor is yours to me. Why try to use violence when a few hours delay will give you all you desire?"

"That's all very well, but how do we know you will keep faith and admit us this evening?"

"It is a risk you must take."

"Well, I prefer to make sure," bawled Shorty, grasp-

ing his automatic and covering Indra Dass with it. "Now then, you guys," he shouted to the men lining the walls who had kept quite silent all this while, "you listen to me. Just you open that Gate or I'll blow a hole in your high priest. Do you get that? Jump to it!"

There was a slight murmur from the men but no one moved, which was not surprising since none of them can have understood a word. The Brahmin laughed gently. "Do you know what they are saying, Mr. Potts?"

"Hey?"

"They are saying that the scorpion . . ."

Shorty nearly leapt his own height in the air. The scorpion, a big black brute nearly six inches long, had crawled up as far as his thigh and it clung to the rough cloth of his breeches when he made frantic efforts to scrape it off with his automatic. His face went all mottled and blotched with loathing of the horrible creature which lashed fiercely at him with its sting, though it could not penetrate the stout cord material. It was not until Winger went to his help with a stick that the scorpion was beaten to death and crushed. Shorty sat down abruptly on a boulder and mopped an agitated brow. He looked fearfully around as though expecting to see another scorpion advancing upon him. All his bombast was gone and he trembled with his fright still upon him.

"Creepers!" he muttered. "Why the hell . . . look here, John, why do they go for me? Let's go. . ."

"I think you are wise, Mr. Potts," smiled Indra Dass. "I shouldn't worry about the scorpions. Their sting is painful but not fatal."

"Worry! Cripes! I'm not worried . . . if only they didn't make a dead set at me."

"You will be quite safe with those strong boots and gaiters," Indra Dass answered. "So, gentlemen, is it

agreed that you return here at sunset? I will send an escort with you who will stay with you and return with you."

"Very well," answered Winger. "I agree. I am glad you will provide an escort. I did not like coming here without one."

"You are quite right. It would not be wise to move at sundown without a strong force."

"Because of tiger, eh?"

"Well . . . yes. Shall we say, because of tiger?"

"Pull yourself together, Shorty," snapped Winger unsympathetically at his companion, who was still looking pale and blotchy.

"O.K., boss. It's them creepers—they get me down, honest they do. . . ." He rose and joined Winger, all idea of shooting his way into the Fort abandoned. He turned his eyes this way and that, uneasily searching the ground, and he seemed relieved when he saw no sign of a scorpion anywhere.

Indra Dass summoned an escort of twenty men from the Fort and they made a picturesque showing. They were Rajputs with fierce beard parted in the middle and they were armed with ancient muskets, silver-chased and having stocks inlaid with ivory. Shorty stared at them with some return of his old swagger and a ghostly 'Can you beat it' emerged from his pallid lips. Winger led the way and in a few seconds they disappeared in the jungle.

"Now, Mr. Vallender, will you come into the Fort? There is a friend awaiting you."

"The Motamid? Ranjit Singh?" I asked.

"Assuredly. His Highness will be very pleased to see you."

"His Highness!"

"Certainly. The Raj Kumar."

"The eldest son of the Maharajah! I think I guessed who the Motamid was."

"Of course. There was no need to make a great mystery about it. The Durbar Sahib was anxious not to involve either himself or his son too openly in this affair. The Maharajah is a very wise man." We were walking towards the Main Gate while we talked. The small postern was opened to us and we passed through it. I was trying to marshall all the questions that I wanted to ask, and Indra Dass guessed what was passing through my mind.

"A little patience, Mr. Vallender, and you can ask as many questions as you like—and what is more, we will answer them to the best of our ability. By the way, you may be interested to know that you are the first European to enter the Fort of Rantumpur. This way."

We climbed the long causeway up the slope and we paced more slowly up the many stone stairs that led to the plateau in which the Fort stood. Then we emerged from the heavily covered and fortified causeway into the daylight, where a group of Indians awaited us. One of them hastened forward with outstretched hand—Ranjit Singh, the Raj Kumar, the eldest son of the Maharajah.

"Welcome, Vallender. I am glad to see you safe and sound out of the hands of those scoundrels. Not that I thought that you were in danger from them."

"Thanks, Your Highness," I replied. "Like all Englishmen, I do not know how to make a suitable speech. I can only go on repeating how grateful I am . . ." Ranjit Singh cut short my stilted words and led the way to a large building and the Brahmin Indra Dass followed. In a few minutes we were seated comfortably in an airy room looking out over the surrounding jungle. I found that an ample divan covered with priceless Persian rugs and silken cushions was an extremely comfortable place on which a tired man could recline. For I suddenly felt very tired now that the nerve-racking tension of being held captive by the two gangsters was at an end.

"A cigarette?" The box was at my elbow. "A cup of tea?" Ranjit Singh saw to our comfort hospitably, and then he sat cross-legged on his divan smoking a hookah while he looked quizzically at me with a broad smile.

"We are waiting for you to open fire with a bombardment of questions," he said. "I am afraid that we shall be overwhelmed. What do you say, Indra Dass?"

"Assuredly, Your Highness. We must ask Mr. Vallender to be merciful."

"Well," I said, "I simply don't know where to begin. I still can't understand why you have let those two men go free."

"They are not free. They never will be free. No matter where they went, they would still not be free. Their fate is certain."

I could not make much of this. "Do you mean you will have them followed wherever they go?" I asked stupidly. "Why not arrest them now?"

"I think you will come to understand that better—perhaps to-night," answered the Raj Kumar.

"Certainly to-night," confirmed Indra Dass. "The calculation is exact. They will come to-night. The power will be strong because of the day of the month."

"Christmas Day!" I said, recalling with a start that it was indeed that day.

"No. The winter solstice and the new moon."

"The day of Peace on Earth and Goodwill to all Men," I said. "That is what Christmas Day is in my religion."

"Doubtless. That will follow."

"Look here," I said. "I'm all in a fog. I want to ask hundreds of questions, but we seem to drift off into other things whenever I try to make a start. I want to ask—oh, about the Treasure and that queer document on which you set such value. About . . . damme, about scorpions . . . and about the Ranjit Singh who died in

America, though I have guessed that he was the descendant of the heir who was expelled from Sangnir years ago."

"Many hundreds of years ago," nodded Indra Dass.

"Shall we help Vallender?" chuckled Ranjit Singh.

"I think it would be a good plan if we sent for Donovan."

"Donovan! I had forgotten all about him."

The Raj Kumar laughed gently. "Such an insignificant creature, isn't he?" He struck a gong by his side and sent a servant who answered it to fetch Donovan.

CHAPTER TEN

THERE was a slight bustle at the door and Donovan came in. With him was old Boota Singh, and I was glad to see his wise, wrinkled face smiling at me.

"Have you brought the Jabberwock?" I asked.

"Assuredly." Boota Singh beamed happily. "All is well with the camel."

"It was not wounded by the firing?"

"A little scratch, that is all."

Donovan lurked in the background and sidled forward. He looked fearfully ill and frail. His face was lined with fatigue and he sank at last on to the edge of a low divan like a man far spent. The Raj Kumar turned a lofty look of contempt upon the man, but I could not help a surge of pity for him.

"He is ill, Your Highness."

"Not yet, not yet," was the surprising answer. A cup of tea was set in front of him and he drank it thirstily.

"Are you all right, Donovan?" I asked.

He mumbled something which I did not catch and I asked again what was the matter with him.

"I'm all right in the daytime. It's at night. I can't sleep. If I do, it'll get me. Why can't you brutes let me go?" he shouted suddenly, and then relapsed again into apathy. "I'll go away, right away. You'll never see me again. I wish to God I had never come here." He was trembling all over and he looked round like a hunted animal. "If I had only known what that devil was doing . . ."

"Winger?"

"No! That nigger Singh . . ."

"He was no nigger!" The Raj Kumar spoke sharply. "He was an evil one, but he came of the purest blood in Rajputana."

"Sorry!" mumbled Donovan. "That's the way Winger always spoke of him. I know it's wrong. No offence meant," he whined. "But the man was a devil."

"That," said Indra Dass, "is a literally exact statement."

"That's what I mean," flashed Donovan. "God! What a fool I was!" He snivelled and wiped away a tear of self-pity. He was indeed an unlovely sight.

"I have sent for you," said the Raj Kumar haughtily, "so that you may tell us the whole story." The aristocratic Rajput stared unsympathetically at the wretched figure of the derelict white man whom he so despised.

"I'll tell you. What's the use of hiding anything now? Now that I understand what that devil has done to us. . . . Can't you let me go? I swear I'll go right away . . . I suppose it's no use. It'll get me sooner or later wherever I go."

"Hadn't you better tell me who you are, Donovan? Let's have the whole story from the beginning."

Donovan looked at me hopelessly. "What does it matter? I'm too far gone. I told you that once before. Too far gone! I suppose there's a last spark of decency left in me. Better not tell. It doesn't matter now."

"Don't be an ass. I might be able to help you to get on your feet again."

Donovan gave a mirthless laugh. "That's what they all say. That's how the trouble started. A very kind gentleman, he was. The religious kind—used to preach at me a lot. Paid my passage Home and gave me a letter to a friend and a bit of money to go on with. He would have done better to have given me a rope to hang myself with. I drank most of the money, tore up

the letter, and when I was on my beam ends I met Winger. That's the hopeless sort I am—it's no good trying to help me."

"Where did you meet Winger?"

"In London. He is an Englishman. I worked with him for a bit, but it got too hot to hold us and we skipped to America just in time."

"Did you go to Williamsville?"

"No. All that talk about Williamsville was lies. We went to Chicago. That's where we met Singh—Ranjit Singh. He was a poor fish, pretty far gone with drink and drugs and all sorts of beastliness. He was no match for those tough Americans. They played him up so long as he had any money, but when he had spent everything they just beat him up and dropped him. He came to me. You see, Winger and Shorty Potts were working together and Winger hadn't much use for me any longer. But Singh, as they called him, used to talk to me a lot because I had been to India, and that made him treat me like a friend—the bloody fool! I always sell my friends . . ."

"When was this?"

"Six months ago or thereabouts. It doesn't matter. Singh was getting desperate for money. He wanted lots for getting drugs that he couldn't do without. Queer stuff that he used to chew and other queerer stuff that he burnt. He was a changed man when he sat in the middle of a smouldering circle of aromatic drugs, chanting an interminable drone while he swayed from side to side with a look of ecstasy on his face. I could not understand a word of what he sang, but the tune I can remember. It is running in my head day and night now. It goes like this . . ."

The Raj Kumar, Indra Dass, and Boota Singh gave an alarmed exclamation. "Stop!" cried Indra Dass. "Be careful what you do!"

Donovan looked up in surprise and then he nodded.

"All right, I understand. He made me see things when he was in those strange moods. I was happy for a time. No, I didn't take drugs. I had enough sense left for that. But I didn't need drugs so long as Singh would let me be with him when he wove his spells. It was grand to be with him . . . the things you saw and felt . . . like paradise while it lasted. And he liked having me with him. You see he trusted me. Then one day he began to tell me how we could both be rich beyond our wildest dreams. I thought he was only raving, because I knew how much he needed money to buy drugs and stuff he wanted for his incantations. He said he was at the end of his tether. He had no more money at all. But he told me how we could get all we wanted in India. He told me that he was the rightful heir to the Treasure of Sanganir."

"He lied," thundered the Raj Kumar. "His ancestor was deprived of his birthright and driven from the country for good reason. That was done because he had given himself up to witchcraft and the practice of all manner of abominations. There is only one rightful heir to the Treasure and that is myself."

"How was I to know that?" whined Donovan. "Singh told me about the Treasure, but I didn't believe him at first. But he kept on about it and at last I became a little convinced that there might be something in it. I wanted money myself pretty badly. Winger gave me some now and again, but I could see that he would drop me any day. I had to have money and I thought I saw how to get it. It was easy enough. I began to drop hints to Winger and Shorty. I said I wanted cash down. My idea was to get as much ready cash as I could and clear out. I didn't like America and the cops were getting on my trail. I meant to get Winger interested in Singh's story without giving names and then sell Singh to Winger for good hard cash."

"A worthy scheme," commented the Raj Kumar,

"and one which would commend itself to a low caste dog."

"Maybe. I know I'm no good. But I didn't mean any harm. I simply thought it an easy way to make a bit of money. Well, it worked all right up to a point. My mistake was in not realizing what brutes Winger and Potts were. They just led me up the garden path, pretending to agree to hand over a good round sum in return for the secret of the Treasure. But I'm no good. I bungled everything. I must have given away somehow that it was Singh who knew the secret. Anyway, they trapped us both one night."

"How do you mean, trapped you?" I asked.

"Exactly what I said. There are plenty of places in Chicago where you can trap a man and his screams will never be heard. My God, I shall never forget that night. There was a look in Singh's eyes when he learnt that I had sold him that I can't forget. I see him still when I hear that tune. His eyes! My God! His eyes!"

I would have gone to Donovan's side, but the Raj Kumar restrained me with an imperious gesture. "Leave him alone, Vallender! You must not go near him. There is danger."

Donovan recovered himself and went on with his horrifying tale. "They got us both. I didn't need much persuasion—none at all. I told them everything while Singh just looked at me with those eyes in which hatred burnt like a red fire. They threw me aside and began to work on Singh. I thought he was a weakling, but he wouldn't say a word even when they did the most horrible things to him. That foul brute, Potts! He has no feelings of mercy or humanity. But it is Winger who has the brains. It was Winger who thought of the awful things they threatened to do to Singh—and then began to do. But Singh said nothing. He seemed to be able to endure anything."

"He was a Rajput!" exclaimed the Raj Kumar proudly.

"All that night and half the next day they tortured Singh. Mentally and physically they tortured him till I was sick, and Singh just kept silent. But his endurance was ending. Winger was afraid the man would die if they continued so they left him alone for a time, baffled and wondering what to do next to get the secret out of him. And while they were consulting angrily together, Singh suddenly spoke."

"He gave in?" I asked.

"No!" thundered the Raj Kumar. "A Rajput would never give way."

"They thought he had broken down," muttered Donovan. "He was clever even in the midst of his agony. He said he would tell everything, and that brute Potts laughed at him, saying he knew niggers were yellow. It was a queer scene. Singh was lying on the ground broken and helpless after the way those fiends had handled him. Potts stood over him laughing like the brute he is and occasionally kicking him with his heavy boot. But Winger was suspicious at first. He was afraid that Singh would trick him with a false description of the key to the Treasure. He told Singh that they would take him with them to India so that they could torture him again if he played them false. Singh agreed to go with them."

"Ahl!" cried the Raj Kumar. "Now I begin to understand."

"Yes. Singh said he would go with them. He promised that he would never leave them."

"Ahl!"

"He said that he would have to draw a plan of the way to the Treasure and the greed of the two men made them believe him. He said he must do the work his own way and he asked for writing materials and drugs—and the other things I have mentioned."

The three Indians stirred slightly and drew in their breath with a hiss.

"They sent me to get the things and it did not take me long. Queer stuff sold by a Hindu pedlar whom I knew about. Then when I got back Singh made his magic circle and crawled to the centre of it, singing that little tune you know about. He had the room darkened so that only the glow from a little charcoal brazier gave light. Winger and Potts watched him and Potts shouted at him once to get on with it. But Singh did not answer. He only continued to sing while he made strange passes with his hands. Then he spoke again and told us three to sit on the ground at places he indicated. Potts sat opposite to him."

"Ah!" Again a sibilant hiss came from the three Indians.

"Winger and I had to sit on either side of him. Potts grumbled at first, but when Singh looked at him and repeated his request, he stopped grumbling and sat where he was told. It was difficult to see anything in the dim light, but I managed. Singh was writing with a reed pen dipped in a saucer of ink—writing swiftly with a slight squeaking noise while Winger and Potts watched him intently. He turned the paper this way and that as he wrote and once Winger broke the silence to ask if he was drawing a plan of the way to the Treasure. But Singh didn't reply."

"Was it the paper that Winger showed me?" I asked.

"Yes, that's it. A lot of gibberish it seemed to me when I saw it. So did Winger. It wasn't written in any language that he could understand and he peered at it in a puzzled way when Singh handed it over."

"To whom did he give it first?" asked Indra Dass.

"To Potts, who tried to make out what was on the paper by the light of the brazier but gave it up, handing it next to Winger."

"And lastly to you?" asked Indra Dass again.

"No. I didn't see it for some days. Winger kept it. He asked Singh whether it was the clue to the Treasure and Singh answered him this time. He said that they must go and show the paper to the Kiladar of Rantumpur Fort in Sanganiir State. And that the Kiladar would then conduct them to the Treasure House. Winger put the paper carefully away and told Singh that they would take him with them to India, but he had lapsed again into a trance. Potts broke out into horrible threats about what he would do if Singh double-crossed them, but again he did not answer. He just sat in the middle of the ring of smouldering incense and stared straight in front of him while Potts bawled and blustered. I was afraid that Potts was going to start his bestiality again, for he jumped to his feet shouting that he would soon make the damned nigger talk. Then he stopped with a queer sort of gasp and gave a strangled cry of alarm which rose to a shriek. I crawled away as far as I could get, and Winger crouched low. Potts fired twice and I managed to switch on the light."

"What had happened?" I asked in bewilderment at this unexpected end to Donovan's tale.

"Manifestation by materialization," explained Indra Dass. "It is quite plain to me. Each man saw what he feared most."

"That's right," muttered Donovan. "Potts was all blotched and mottled with fright. 'Did you see it?' he asked Winger in a trembling voice. 'I saw it,' Winger answered, 'the great brute, just about to spring.' And Potts stared at him stupidly. 'That's not what I saw,' he muttered. 'Gee! If there were creepers as big as that, I'd swear off drink for keeps, huh!' He tried to laugh his fright off, but he was badly shaken."

"Did you see anything?" I asked.

"Not what they saw. I saw only something big and black like a cloud far away. It has been coming nearer

and nearer. One day it will touch me and then . . .” The wretched little wisp of a man shrugged his thin shoulders. “I don’t think I mind very much. It’s the pain I’m afraid of. I saw a cholera epidemic once, and I saw men die of it, shrieking with agony as the cramps got them. But it’s pretty quick—only a few hours. I’ve had the fear of catching it with me for years . . .”

“Don’t talk rot, Donovan,” I counselled roughly, but he only shook his head miserably.

“Ever since then I have lived in fear,” he went on in a dull monotone. “From that moment I knew what was coming to me.”

“Even as the other two men also knew,” the Brahmin intoned. “They may try to hide their fears and their greed may have driven them on. But they also live in fear.”

“Go on with your story, Donovan,” I said.

“There’s not much more to tell. When I switched on the light there was nothing to be seen but Singh sitting with his eyes closed. He did not answer when spoken to, and Potts tried to hide his fright by shouting at him. Then he gave Singh a bit of a shove with his boot and the Indian fell over sideways. He was dead.”

“Dead! ”

“Dead as mutton. Winger cursed Potts for having been the cause of his death, and the two men had a tremendous quarrel during which I tried to slip away. But they stopped me and told me I should have to go with them to India as interpreter now that Singh was dead. I tried to get out of it all—honest I did. I only wanted a bit of money for selling Singh to them, but they had a hold over me now and they said they would pin Singh’s death on to me. They could have done it easily—in Chicago. It was no good. I had to go with them and here I am.”

"Was it part of their plan for you to take a job with me?" I asked.

"No. I only came to spy about a bit. I never expected you to offer me a job. I tried to put you off it, didn't I? You were decent to me, really decent. None of your damned Christian charity, but just decency. Something I hadn't met with for years. I made a feeble attempt to take your offer and go straight. But what was the use with those two devils camped in the Nimli Hills . . . and that black cloud coming nearer and nearer? I hadn't a hope, not a hope."

"So you helped them by interpreting?"

"Yes. But it was no good, of course. I couldn't read the paper, however much Potts and Winger threatened me. I was terrified that they would treat me like they treated Singh so I pretended to read a lot of gibberish from it the first time we went to the Gate of the Fort. No wonder they took no notice from inside."

"Of course," explained Indra Dass. "I thought that he had not the real paper with him and that a clumsy trick was being tried. It was not until you brought the real document and read the first three mantras from it, that I was sure."

"When they could get no reply from the Gate," went on Donovan, "they started to abuse and threaten me again. So I told them they had better get you to help them. They thought that a good idea and they intended to ask your help in a friendly way without explaining their real purpose. They were on their way to do this when you met them for the first time. You played into their hands by inviting them to stay with you for Christmas."

"I made a complete fool of myself," I said bitterly. "I ought to have listened to the warnings everyone gave me."

"If you had been a pious Hindu," commented the Raj Kumar, "you would have felt the aura of evil round

this low-caste dog and his associates as strongly as your staff did."

"Oh, I felt that something was wrong, if that is what you mean. But my Western mind is not responsive to such prompting. It only made me the more obstinately determined to go on with my silly idea of doing the decent thing to Donovan at Christmas time. At any other time of the year, I don't suppose I should have been such an ass. However, it is no use crying about it now. I did what I did."

"And thereby, Vallender, you put yourself in grave danger."

"Of course. But thanks to you that is all over now."

The three Indians remained silent at this until the Raj Kumar spoke slowly. "The danger is not over, my dear Vallender. But do not fear. You have powerful friends—the three of us, in fact. Boota Singh is, it is true, only a camel-man, but he is a Rajput of the purest blood and he is attached to you by ties of affection. That is important, very important. He will stay near you to-night and you must trust him in all things."

Astonishment prevented me from saying anything and the Raj Kumar went proudly on. "I am the eldest son of the Maharajah and Indra Dass is a Brahmin. We have some knowledge of the forces of destruction that have been loosed against the enemies of the Maharajah. Nothing can save those against whom they are directed."

"My God!" came from Donovan in a husky whisper. "Let me go! You can if you like. I never meant any harm, not really. . . ."

"You betrayed Ranjit Singh, my kinsman!"

"He was a devil. He was your enemy. For God's sake let me go," whined Donovan.

"You cannot escape from your fate. Indra does not forgive," boomed Indra Dass.

"I'll go right away out of the country. I swear it."

I should be safe where there isn't . . . isn't any cholera. I don't want to die . . .” His voice trailed away in a quavering whine.

“Let him go, Your Highness. He is of no account.”

“No! He would only go and warn the two men who are to come here at sunset.”

“Let him be kept here until the two men come. Then turn him out of the Fort.”

“Into the jungle at night!” exclaimed the Raj Kumar. “You don't know what you ask.”

“I'll take the chance,” gasped Donovan eagerly. “Let me go, let me get away from everything. You will never see me again—any of you.”

The Raj Kumar considered for a moment and then Indra Dass whispered something in his ear. A cruel smile curved the Raj Kumar's lips for a second and then he nodded to me. “Very well, Vallender, it shall be as you wish. He shall be thrust forth after the two men have been admitted.”

Donovan broke into protestations of thanks, but the Raj Kumar cut him short and had him led away. The wretched derelict shambled out, babbling a mixture of relief and thanks and declarations that we should see no more of him. But he was wrong. I did see him once again.

The Raj Kumar drew a long breath. “The presence of such men pollutes the air,” he declared. “Really, Vallender, I find it difficult to understand why you ever wanted to do anything to help him. It is quite incomprehensible to me. Kindness of heart is wasted on such people. Nor do I think you have done him any good by interceding for him. He will not escape the vengeance of Ranjit Singh.”

“Will you please make that part of Donovan's tale clearer?”

“Certainly, though I think you have already guessed the truth. Ranjit Singh in America was, of course, the

descendant of the evil man who was banished from the succession to the throne of Sanganir many many years ago. From generation to generation a watch was kept upon that vile brood. Their knowledge of magic and witchcraft was handed on from father to son. Thus the last of the line who has now perished, though fallen on evil days, had such knowledge. But his power must have diminished otherwise he would not have suffered poverty as Donovan has described. Nor would he have ever dreamt of such a mad scheme as to try and rob the Treasure House of Sanganir, of which he had secret knowledge. He knew too well how it was guarded, and what would be the fate of robbers. Yet we know that he did have such an idea and it was the cause of his horrible death."

"But . . ."

"Wait a minute. He would not, of course, disclose the secret to anyone. He was a Rajput. He would suffer anything rather than that. He suffered torture and, when he knew that he must die, he conceived the most horrible revenge on those who had tormented him. He pretended to give way to their demands and to give them a document which would lead them to the Treasure. Actually he used his arts to weave a spell which would lead them to their death at the appointed time. That time is now at hand. They cannot escape."

I could not mistake the meaning of the Raj Kumar. He spoke very definitely and firmly with no hint of vague threats. He spoke easily and naturally of things which my Western mind rejected as fantastic and incredible. But I foresaw the trouble that might arise from the death of two American subjects at the hands of the defenders of the Fort. There would be inquiries made and I might find myself involved in all manner of unpleasantness. I could imagine how absurd the cold statement of the potency of a magical spell would

sound in a Court of Law. I said something of the sort to the Raj Kumar and the Brahmin. But their whole mien was one of stern triumph over the evil machinations of those who were plotting to despoil the Treasure and they rejected my cautious admonitions about possible trouble.

"The men will not die at the hands of my troopers," declared the Raj Kumar.

"Let me try and make it quite clear to you, Mr. Vallender," the Brahmin said. "I know that it will be difficult, since we are Hindus while you are not. Yet you have read many of our books of philosophy and they will help you to understand. Why not? Our philosophy is fundamental and eternal and applicable to all men in all lands at all times. Otherwise it would not be true. Remember that matter is but a manifestation of mind. It is mind that is all important."

"So much I have read," I answered. "But I have not accepted it as true. That system of philosophy was advocated among philosophers of my own land, but it has not found general acceptance."

"Nevertheless it is true, Sahib. But do not let us dispute the matter now, though I think I could convince you. I wish to speak of the mind of evil men such as the two Americans. They are violent men of a low order of intelligence such as we Hindus despise. Under firm control and threat of punishment such men may do useful work. But uncontrolled their minds become attuned to evil. They are restrained only by their own fears. Since their minds are evil, their fears are very terrible. The one is a direct consequence of the other. Where the mind is virtuous a man's fears are mild and harmless. In the case of a saint fear is absent altogether. Do I make myself clear? "

"Yes. . . ."

"But since few men are virtuous most men are tormented from time to time by fears. They appear in

the form of terrible dreams, nightmares. Many people have a form of nightmare which recurs and from which they wake sweating with fear. Is that not so? ”

“ Of course.”

“ The remedy is to adopt a saintly mode of life in contemplation of the eternal verities. But that is impossible for evil men who have become confirmed in their evil mode of thought. The more wicked they become, the more terrible becomes their secret fear. They may bury it away and conceal it by bragging and boasting of their courage. But it is there all the time, growing stronger and stronger. Often it ends in madness, when they die tormented by what some people call horrible visions but which we Hindus know to be real manifestations of their fear.”

“ But, look here, Indra Dass . . . ”

The Brahmin held up his hand for silence and he went on with his strange statement. “ Under certain circumstances a man’s secret fear can be called forth and made manifest in material form. Such magical arts are frowned upon by the Brahmins on account of their frightful consequences. There is always the danger that the evil monsters called forth might live on and infest the earth. Such things have happened in the past. In every land there are legends of dragons and monsters. But there are times when such a materialization is inevitable. Such a time is the present. You ask why? It is because the Gods themselves are offended and their wrath must be discharged. In this affair all the men involved are very evil men—who shall choose between them for pre-eminence in evil? And Ranjit Singh had knowledge of the Elemental Powers. He called them forth and in doing so affronted Indra himself, whose servant I am.”

This was getting beyond my comprehension. I tried to cling as far as possible to the matters of fact involved. “ Then Ranjit Singh hopes to bring about the death of

Winger and Potts by working on their secret fears? Is that it?"

The Raj Kumar and Indra Dass laughed gently. The former nodded shrewdly at me. "There speaks the practical Englishman," he said in a bantering tone. "It is no good, Indra Dass, he is only interested in material things. You will have to give it up."

"Not so, Your Highness. I think that Mr. Vallender has summed up my discourse very fairly. I would only correct him in one respect. The danger from the materialization of hidden fears threatens all who are involved."

"I see. I had forgotten Donovan. It is curious how that miserable creature has the knack of getting forgotten. However, that is the lot. Only those three are threatened."

"There is one more."

"What? Another? Someone else I have not heard of?"

"No, indeed. Far from it. No other than yourself!"

I sprang to my feet. "I have had nothing to do with the attempt on the Treasure."

"Nothing?" asked the Raj Kumar ironically. "Not by intention perhaps. But I should not say that you had had nothing to do with the affair."

"But, good heavens," I cried, "are you trying to tell me that this—this Curse let loose by Ranjit Singh in America is—is going to . . ." I sat down again hurriedly. It was all very well to be sceptical about the whole thing when the supposed danger was directed against someone else. But if I was going to be involved too . . . well, I suppose my Western mind ought to have rejected all the hocus-pocus, but the Raj Kumar, the Brahmin, and old Boota Singh were regarding me gravely although with a friendly regard. And what they were saying did not sound so absurd in the setting of an ancient room in the age-old Fort of Rantumpur. I hardly heard

Indra Dass who continued to expound with such a confoundedly convincing manner. How could I be threatened? I had lived long enough in India to have a vague sort of belief in magical powers, but it was all so impersonal and distant from every day happenings that I never bothered to decide whether I really was a believer or not.

" . . . And so I stopped you at once when you were about to read the fourth mantra. That would have placed you in serious jeopardy. But perhaps I can convince you better by practical means such as an Englishman prefers. Seeing is believing, is it not, Mr. Vallender? "

" Of course. "

" Then did you see the scorpions which caused Potts such discomfort? "

" Yes. Everyone saw them. Beastly things, I don't wonder that Potts was worried. He seems to have a horror of insects like that. "

" Truly, " intoned the Brahmin, " it is with him a besetting fear which he tries to conceal by useless boasting. "

" Look here! " I said. " Do you mean to say that . . . ? " I did not finish the sentence. A creepy feeling ran up my spine. A horrid crawly sensation affected my scalp. For the first time I felt afraid.

" It is the beginning. The scorpions were, of course, manifestations by materialization. The curse of Ranjit Singh has begun. "

" But I saw the brutes, " I burst out. " I saw them. They were real. "

" Assuredly, very real. That is why we are anxious for your safety. "

I felt rather sick. " I think I will return to my Camp, " I said. " I don't like this. I don't like it at all. I would rather have nothing more to do with the matter. This talk of the vengeance of Ranjit Singh may be true—or it

may be nonsense—but I wish to have nothing to do with it. If it is true, I had better keep away. If it isn't, well I still don't want to be involved in whatever you intend to do to the Americans. So, Boota Singh, will you bring the Jabberwock and I will depart."

"No, Mr. Vallender, you will not depart. It is I who give orders here." The Raj Kumar spoke with a haughty air of authority. "You will have to pardon my interference, but we are your good friends and we intend to protect you against yourself, even if you refuse our help. We know that you are in danger and we know that you will not escape it by going a short distance away."

"Yet you let Donovan go," I flashed.

"Truly. But he will not escape."

"You are going to murder these men?"

"No, Mr. Vallender," replied the Brahmin gravely, "we are but the instruments of divine vengeance. It is useless to try and resist. If we did we should ourselves become the objects of vengeance. I beg you not to become inflamed with anger."

"I don't believe a word," I fumed. "Anyway, I have no secret fears on which you can work. I don't suffer from nightmare."

"Never?"

"Well, I have had nightmares—the usual sort that most people have. Being chased by something, and only just slamming the door behind in the nick of time, and then hearing it opened by the thing that is chasing me. A lot of rot!" My wrath began to abate in face of the courteous and friendly regard of the three men, though the son of the Maharajah maintained his air of stern command, and it was he who continued the conversation.

"We cannot allow you to run ignorantly into terrible danger," he said firmly. "You must be guided by us. I know you are still in a state of disbelief. But I do not think you will continue in it for long. To-night there

will be a culmination of the forces of evil. The calculations in the document you tried to decipher are clear. We must play our part unless we wish to be destroyed. And we must give you such protection as we can. I decline to let you depart. You must stay here and you will need all your courage."

"Why?" I asked bluntly.

"Because it is possible that you will see terrible sights. The materializations of the evil men's fears may become manifest to you. It may be very horrible, though you will be protected as far as a non-Hindu can be protected by Indra Dass. If all goes well this night will see the final discharge of the Elemental Power."

"Christmas night!" I exclaimed bitterly.

"The Winter Solstice," corrected Indra Dass.

"The festival of Peace on Earth and Goodwill to all Men!"

"Assuredly. The world will be a cleaner place if evil men are driven from it."

"I'll have nothing to do with your plan. Let me go. I'll take the risk, if there is any."

"As Donovan did? No, my dear Vallender, you shall not go. Now let us rest until sundown. I am sure you are tired."

It was true. I was desperately tired, but I felt that I could not rest. My nerves were all on edge and my skin was dry. My brain was on fire with an interminable train of thought which went round and round without end. The Raj Kumar and his two companions withdrew, and presently a servant brought me some delicious tea which I drank thirstily.

Perhaps there was a mild drug in it, for soon afterwards I felt more at peace and drowsed on the divan in greater comfort of mind and body throughout the remainder of the afternoon and evening. And then suddenly I was fully awake.

The Raj Kumar stood by my side. "Come," he said,

“ it is time to go and welcome the Americans. You must come with me. Further, you must stay near Boota Singh who has received all necessary instruction in regard to your protection. You are ready? Then we will go.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BOOTA SINGH attached himself firmly to me with a strong determination not to let me out of his sight. He made an apology for his persistence with all the charming courtesy for which a Rajput is famed. His sunny smile disarmed any resentment which still smouldered within me and by the time we had reached the place where I had been greeted by the Raj Kumar at the top of the causeway leading from the Main Gate, I was in a better frame of mind. It was pleasant to observe the ease with which the old camel man spoke with the son of the Maharajah. Though they were far apart in wealth and position they were both Rajputs by caste and they met with mutual respect.

I had a better opportunity of seeing the wonders of the ancient Fort during our walk. The Raj Kumar pointed out the women's quarters, the barracks for the troops, the street in which there was a bazaar with all kinds of shopkeepers and tradesmen plying their trades, the massive masonry tanks into which water was drawn from a deep well. The Fort was in fact a complete town nearly half a mile long, but only a few hundred yards wide. I asked one question about a matter which had puzzled me.

"Who is the Commander of the Fort, the Kiladar? May I not have the honour of meeting him?"

"You have already met. Indra Dass is the Kiladar."

"Indra Dass! A Brahmin? Is that not very unusual, Your Highness?"

"Certainly. But Rantumpur Fort is a very unusual Fort." The Raj Kumar gave me a short history of the

amazing structure, so that I looked with growing awe at the picturesque jumble of octagonal turrets, fretted marble panels, queer, unexpected balconies and towers and mighty titanic masonry that made up a fantastic medley. As old as Time, it was a palace as well as a Fort—a palace surrounded by a town, and the whole enclosed in a tremendous wall of red sandstone. And somewhere amidst the thousand buildings and passages lay the Treasure of Sanganir, founded in the far-off days when the Fort was built by Titans and increasing year by year ever since!

We stopped at a place where an embrasure gave us a good view over the sea of tree-tops that filled the Valley. We could see the open space in front of the Main Gate, where I was told that Indra Dass awaited the arrival of the two men whom I still thought of as two Americans in spite of Donovan's statement that Winger was an Englishman. From somewhere not far off there was a tinkling wail of music and the throb of a drum. There was a sweet smell in the air compounded of spices and the scent of jasmine.

Boota Singh approached nearer to me and murmured an apology again. He held a minute phial in his hand, and he smeared a small quantity of attar of roses on the lapels of my coat, so that the strong aroma fought with the sickly sweetness of jasmine. While he did this he muttered something that I could not understand. Then he salaamed and stepped back a pace, after which he resumed his place close beside me. The Raj Kumar looked on with approval at this little ceremony, but he said no word. It was very quiet where we stood with the setting sun sending long shadows trailing across the masonry platform.

Other men came to join us. I do not know who they were. Some were troopers armed with silver-chased matchlocks, but others must have been the officers of the garrison. They saluted the Raj Kumar after their own

fashion and then stood waiting in silence—a silence that I began to find oppressive. There was a tension in the air that tautened my nerves to an unpleasant degree.

The sun disappeared behind the western ridge bordering the Valley. From one of the many temples that stood on the platform of the Fort a conch shell sounded its thin piercing note, while a bell rang with a silvery chime for the evening celebration. Again and again the conch shell roused the echoes and a tom-tom added a note of urgency and alarm. A wave of emotion ran through the assembled people and the Raj Kumar spoke aloud, shattering the silence with startling effect.

“They come!”

Two tiny figures at the head of a column of State troopers could be seen emerging from the jungle. From the height from which we watched they were foreshortened and insignificant like ants. Shorty Potts led, followed by Winger, and it was possible to see how Shorty was strutting and swaggering in front, while Winger paced less aggressively behind him. The party disappeared into the dark mouth of the Main Gate, and as they did so the last of the warm rays of the sun vanished, leaving the Fort and the tossing waves of the trees a ghastly grey from which nearly all colour was stricken.

We had not long to wait. By this time the assembled crowd was grouped in a rough semicircle facing the top of the causeway. The Raj Kumar took his stand at the centre and he motioned to me and Boota Singh to stand close behind him. There was a murmur and a sound of many footsteps from the causeway and then Shorty swaggered forth with his hat on the back of his head followed by Winger, who had not such an assured air, for his eye swivelled this way and that uneasily.

“Hullo, Petel!” Shorty shouted at the sight of me. “Here we are! My! If this ain’t fine! Reception Committee, huh?”

Winger frowned and tried to silence his exuberant friend. "Who is the Kiladar?" he asked.

"I am," answered Indra Dass courteously, "I am sorry I did not make that clear."

"So you're the guy we have come to see?" Shorty said effusively. "Why didn't you say so before?"

"It was indeed very remiss of me," replied Indra Dass.

"What's he say?" Shorty asked rudely. "Why don't he talk plain English? He talks like the limey." He spat his contempt on the ground and a shudder ran through the throng. The Raj Kumar's eyes blazed at the insult, but he held himself in check.

"Present my two guests to me," he commanded, and the Brahmin obeyed.

"This is Mr. Potts, Your Highness."

"Highness? Well, if that don't beat everything. You the Maharajah, huh? Pleased to meet you." Shorty held out his hand which the Raj Kumar ignored. "That's me. Ephraim Potts. Shorty to his friends." He looked round for applause at his free and independent democratic attitude.

"This is Mr. Winger, Mr. John P. Winger, of London, Your Highness."

Winger started. "Of London? How do you . . . I'm not an Englishman. I'm an American subject—I can prove it."

The Raj Kumar salaamed gravely without noticing this outburst. "I am glad to welcome you both to Rantumpur," he said. "All is prepared for your entertainment."

"I don't understand," said Winger. "Who are you? We came to see the Kiladar with whom we have some business."

"Recite to him my titles," commanded the Raj Kumar haughtily, and a herald stood forth. He boomed out the long roll of the Raj Kumar's names and titles and whenever he paused the crowd responded with a

shout. A hundred tulwars flashed into the air with a sibilant hiss from the blades as they were drawn from their jewelled scabbards. It was a magnificent sight as the flower of Rajput chivalry acclaimed the heir to the throne of Sanganir as they and their fathers and their fathers' fathers had done for untold centuries. The effect on Shorty and Winger was remarkable. Shorty tried to swagger and look round with a superior grin, but he only succeeded in looking supremely foolish and ill-mannered. Winger's uneasiness became more manifest and I think he, being more sensitive than the egregious Potts, knew that there was something wrong about the apparently cordial welcome they were receiving.

There was a short pause after the ceremonial recitation of the Raj Kumar's titles and then Indra Dass explained the meaning of what had happened to Winger.

"The Raj Kumar is the eldest son of the Maharajah of Sanganir, Mr. Winger. He bears many names and titles and you heard how he is the son of celebrated forebears. He is descended from the Sun himself. But it will be easier for you to remember the name by which he is best known—Ranjit Singh."

"Ranjit Singh!" exclaimed Winger. "But that was the name of the man . . ."

"Of the man you knew in America who is now dead."

"Well . . . let's get to business."

"Certainly. But I take my orders from His Highness, and he will give order, Mr. Winger, in his own good time."

"Will he admit me and my friend to the Treasure House?"

"Assuredly. The document you brought here from that other Ranjit Singh was explicit. We dare not disobey it."

"Dare not?" Winger was suspicious and wary. He

could scarcely believe that his goal was really within his grasp. "I don't understand you. There's something phoney about all this. Ranjit Singh told us that you would allow us to help ourselves to the Treasure. Is that true?"

"Certainly. You may take away anything you please. There will be no need for you to shoot your way out as your friend is in favour of doing."

"Say!" cried Shorty. "Who's been talking like that? Not me! No, Sir! Let's manage everything nice and friendly."

"Liar!" thundered the Raj Kumar.

"Hey, hey!" blustered Shorty. "You say that again!"

"Liar!"

"Put your gun away, you fool," snarled Winger. "You'll spoil everything."

"I'm not going to let old Whiskers here get away with calling me a liar," bawled Shorty. "He can't do a thing like that, the dirty nigger."

The Raj Kumar turned grey at the insult, but he controlled himself. Winger shouted angrily at Shorty again, and the big bully slowly put his automatic away. There was a sigh from the crowd as he did so, and Indra Dass spoke blandly with a quiet voice.

"You have never been nearer to death than you were a minute ago, Mr. Potts. His Highness had but to crook his little finger when a dozen swords would have been plunged into your body. You were indeed in great danger. It is not well for you to indulge in evil thoughts—not well at all."

Shorty did not reply. There was something in Indra Dass's ironic tones which stirred a recent memory in his dull brain, and he gave a hasty glance round followed by a gasp of horror at the sight of several scorpions ringing him round and advancing with their claws held menacingly high. Shorty began to stamp frenziedly at

them while his podgy face went pale with agitation. The Raj Kumar and the impassive men surrounding him did not move. Boota Singh gripped my wrist with his sinewy hand and whispered to me not to move either.

"It will pass," he muttered. "But the man's fears will not pass. The power increases!"

The sight of the horrible insects in such numbers affected me with a creepy feeling. They were big black brutes, bigger than I had ever seen before. Winger, too, watched the curious scene with a deep frown, but his greed restrained him from throwing up the affair for the present. His uncertainty and nervousness were patent to us all, but he nerved himself to go on. The darkness deepened rapidly and Shorty suddenly shouted for lights.

"It's getting dark," he quavered. "I shan't be able to see the brutes. The place is swarming with them. Can't we have a light? Gee! This is getting me down."

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Potts," counselled Indra Dass. "I will ask His Highness to order lights. But I advise you not to insult His Highness again."

"Wha—what do you mean?" gasped Shorty. "Do you mean that he set those brutes on me? Insects!"

"Good gracious, no, Mr. Potts. If you saw anything, it must have been a materialization of your own thoughts."

"If I saw . . . ? If . . . ? I saw them all right. You can't kid me! No, Sir! What are you all staring at?" He tried to recover his bragging manner, but he was still too shaken to accomplish it. Fortunately for him a diversion was made by the arrival of lights. A dozen torch-bearers stationed themselves in a semicircle behind the central group and cast a warm glow over the scene. Shorty sighed his relief and even managed a semblance of a grin as soon as he satisfied himself with a quick look round that the ground was clear.

"Gosh! That's swell! Come on, John! Let's go

and cash in. Shall I be glad to get away from this joint? I'll say I shall. Too many creepers! And too many rattlers! C'm on! "

"One moment! " It was the Raj Kumar who spoke with his air of authority. " Everything must be done decently and in good order. I have prepared entertainment for my distinguished guests. After we have partaken of refreshment we will proceed to the Treasure House."

"Thanks, Your Highness, but I would rather do without the entertainment. Let us conclude our business and go."

"Sure! You can cut out the show, Highness. Cut it right out."

"Once more I must remind you that it is I who give orders here," frowned the Raj Kumar. Without more ado he led the way across the platform of the Fort to one of the palaces and we followed behind him. More torch-bearers lined the way and lighted our path with a strong ruddy glare so that we travelled along a path of light which enabled Shorty to strut and swagger to his heart's content, though he kept a wary eye on the ground as he went. Boota Singh stuck close to me and was by my side when we entered the palace, went up the steps and so into a spacious hall which had been prepared for a nautch.

I was conducted to a dais where the Raj Kumar sat on a crimson silk cushion. Indra Dass sat on his right and I sat on his left. Shorty and Winger were given cushions by my side and Boota Singh crouched behind me. A few other men were also accommodated on the dais, but most of the nobility and gentry grouped themselves in serried ranks down the two sides of the hall while the torch-bearers stood facing us. Thus there was an empty quadrangle in the centre reflecting the glow of the torches from its polished marble floor. There was scarcely a sound as the crowd padded softly to its ap-

pointed place on bare feet. The Raj Kumar made a sign and everyone sat watching with impassive faces. They made a magnificent picture for they all wore splendid clothes and many jewels flashed in the torch-light from necklets, bangles and turbans.

Shorty and Winger were impressed against their will by the wonderful sight, but they did their best to appear at ease. Shorty lounged with ill-mannered awkwardness and stared rudely round with an intentional air of republican disapproval. But Winger was plainly suspicious and uncomfortable—his ferrety eyes darted this way and that as though he were afraid that he was being caught in a trap. As for me, I was enthralled by the splendour of this noble gathering of Rajput chivalry and I knew how greatly honoured I was by being allowed to attend in a place of honour. I had, of course, been at a nautch several times, but never at one of such magnificence or of such deep significance.

"What's going to happen?" whispered Winger to me.

"Nautch girls will dance," I said curtly. "And there will be refreshments."

"Drinks? I could do with one. I don't like this at all, Vallender. These devils are up to something."

"Can you beat it?" Shorty muttered. "Nautch goils, huh?"

"This torch-light is too bright," complained Winger. "It dazzles me, shining up from the floor like that."

"Suits me all right," Shorty announced. "Not that there are likely to be creepers in here, are there, Pete?"

He seemed to want an answer so I agreed with him and he nodded with satisfaction. "Not that I really mind them," he lied, "but I'll own they give me shivers down my spine. Queer, ain't it?"

Servants came round handing refreshments, but there

were none of the drinks that Winger hoped for. There was betel-nut for chewing, and most of the Rajputs took a pinch. And there were many sweetmeats and delicacies served on fresh green leaves in lieu of platters. Shorty looked at them superciliously and decided to try and chew betel-nut. His jaws moved rhythmically for a few moments with practised skill while he savoured the tang of the astringent nut and the powdered lime with which it was mixed. Then he gave an exclamation of disgust and turning his head sideways spat out the mixture with noisy relief.

A white-haired old gentleman near whom the spittle fell sprang to his feet and so did his son. Their faces were convulsed with fury and disgust and the old man cried out something to the Raj Kumar which I could not understand. A murmur rose from the assembly, but otherwise there was no move. The Raj Kumar spoke rapidly and again I was at a loss to understand. The quick, hissing speech, as menacing as the sibilant warning of a snake, eluded me, but its meaning was pretty clear. The two Rajputs sat down again with glances of hatred at Shorty who returned them with insolent contempt. The incident evidently alarmed Winger, for he had enough sense to guess how seriously Shorty was insulting the assembled company.

"The bloody fool," he muttered to me. "They'll murder him if he doesn't look out. Look here, Vallerder," he whispered to me so that Shorty could not hear, "have you thought over that idea of you and me going in together. It isn't too late. I believe you could get me out of this place. These devils are up to something. Well, if it's Shorty they want, I don't mind if the fool gets what is coming to him. If you say a word to His Highness, he'll let me go with something worth having—I won't be unreasonable. Enough to compensate us both for our trouble—you and me, I mean. Well, what do you say? I'm sick and tired of Shorty. They can do

what they like with him . . .” And so he went on whispering urgently, trying to double-cross his friend even now at the last moment. My gorge rose at the torrent of temptation poured out by Winger. There was a sort of plausibleness about his crazy plan, and he was insistent that I should speak to the Raj Kumar at once proposing to let him do what he liked with Shorty provided that Winger and I were allowed to depart with a substantial reward in cash or jewels. I tried to stop him with an angry refusal, but he ran on at such a pace that it was wellnigh impossible, but suddenly the nautch girls began to sing and then conversation became out of the question.

There were twenty girls dressed in the heavy swinging pleated skirts of their profession. They glided into position on the bare quadrangle of the marble floor with a trio of musicians behind them who played the strange melodies of the Orient which are so difficult for Western ears to follow. They played in unison without harmonies, but their instruments had many strings which vibrated only in sympathy without being actually plucked, so that there was a queer unearthly wailing quality about the music which affected me strongly. A little drum was played skilfully by one of the musicians using his fingers and the palms of his hands to conjure astonishing rhythms from the scent-laden air. To and fro the girls glided and swayed, dancing with the sinuous bending of their slim bodies and with many graceful gestures of their fingers. From time to time they twirled round so that their pleated skirts swung heavily outwards while they matched the rhythm of the drum with tiny stamps of their feet on the hard floor which set a hundred bells on their anklets a-tinkling. And while they danced they sang in unison an elusive melody which I could not attempt to follow, so cunningly did it run up and down the wailing scales of Hindu music.

The dancing of the nautch girls and their nasal

singing continued interminably, and Winger began to fidget while Shorty yawned noisily.

"How long is this going on?" Winger asked, making himself heard above the music.

"A long time, I expect," I answered.

"Those torches are too bright," he complained.

They were not very bright, but they threw into relief the dark shadows behind the impassive ranks of the waiting multitude. The glare was strongly reflected in the polished floor, and this troubled Winger who kept putting up his hand to shield his eyes.

"It makes me kind o' sleepy," he said, and Shorty, too, had a glazed look in his pig's eyes which grew more and more fixed in expression. Two or three times Winger's head nodded forward, and he recovered himself with a jerk. I was surprised at this for I did not find the lights oppressive, though my eyes were intrigued by the long shadows that interlaced as the dancing girls glided this way and that. And then the nautch girls began to sing and dance at Winger and Shorty while the lilt of their song changed to a more urgent beat and rhythm. The two men stared at the dancers as though hypnotized, and Winger did not answer when I spoke to him asking him if he was all right.

I could not understand the words of the song the girls were singing. I turned to the Raj Kumar to ask him to interpret, but the words froze on my lips. There was such a look of triumph and hatred in his face that I forbore to speak. I do not think he would have answered if I had. Faster and faster and more and more menacing grew the sound of the music, while the girls' skirts swung from side to side with a swish-swish till it seemed that they could not keep pace with the hurrying notes. And then with a last wild skirl on the tom-tom the music ceased and the girls sank to the ground in a graceful obeisance.

The sudden silence was as stunning as a great sound

would have been. In the midst of it the Raj Kumar stood and clapped his hands. With a united surge the assembled company also rose.

"The time is at hand!" announced the Raj Kumar. He turned to the two men and asked if they were ready to go to the Treasure House. They had risen dazedly to their feet with the rest and they answered that they were ready. They spoke in an odd voice like sleep-walkers. At a sign from the Raj Kumar the torch-bearers went on ahead and we followed behind—the Raj Kumar, Indra Dass, myself and Boota Singh, and the two Americans. No one else came. Between two silent ranks of Rajput nobility we passed out of the hall and down a flight of stone steps into a crypt.

The torch-bearers went on ahead, and one by one they fixed their torches in metal sockets attached to the wall of the interminable passages along which we walked under the ground. This way and that the catacombs led us till I lost all sense of direction, and one by one the torches were left burning in their sconces until only two remained. How many doors we passed through and how many times Indra Dass locked and unlocked massive fastenings, I do not know. But at last the Raj Kumar and Indra Dass themselves took the torches from the last two torch-bearers, who slipped away into the shadows leaving us alone. During the whole of the underground journey neither Winger nor Shorty uttered a word.

"The time is at hand!" again cried the Raj Kumar, and Indra Dass undid the last locks in a great iron-studded door that swung open before us. "Enter! Enter the Treasure House of Sanganir!"

Winger and Shorty hastened forward. Their lassitude fell from them and they gazed eagerly round. I saw a huge vaulted chamber stretching away into the darkness while the Raj Kumar and Indra Dass stood like statues holding the blazing torches which gave all too little light. I was conscious that Boota Singh was

close to me, and that his delicate sinewy hand was laid on my wrist from time to time, restraining me from moving very far away from the lights. And then I saw that the whole place was shimmering with a thousand points of light from a heaped mass of jewellery that lay in careless heaps. I could make no attempt to estimate the extent of the piles and piles of treasure that stretched away into the dim shadows. Heap upon heap, pile upon pile, chest after chest, the illimitable wealth of ages lay before me dazzling my eyes with its splendour. And yet I had a strange feeling upon me that it was all a dream.

I heard Shorty give a sudden shout. "John! Come on here! Gee! It ain't real!" But there was a satisfied sound in his voice belying his words. "Look at that! Worth a million! Fill your pockets, John, and let's go. Wait a minute, though. Maybe there's something better."

Winger's voice came to me muffled by distance. "I've got all I want. God! It frightens me, Shorty. Let's get out of this. Shorty! Shorty! Where are you?" I could see him moving about in the shadows some little distance away. "Shorty! Shorty! Don't be a bloody fool! Where are you? I'm going to get out of this. . . ."

He disappeared among the dim heaps of priceless treasure but I could hear his steps. He stumbled once and gave a strangled cry of fright. He called again to Shorty, but there was no answer. And then he came into view stumbling towards us. In his hands he held a shimmering mass of jewels and gold with a frenzied clutch, while his eyes rolled this way and that and sweat poured from his brow streaking his cheeks, all grimy with the dust of ages.

And then there came a horrible scream from Shorty echoing along the vaulted roof. Two shots were fired and then the awful shriek of mortal terror came again.

I started forward instinctively, but Boota Singh gripped my wrist. A series of the most frightful screams made my blood run cold. I struggled with the dream-sensation that clogged my movements and I broke away from Boota Singh. I ran to the help of my enemy who was in such dire need of help. I could do no other. I heard an alarmed shout from Boota Singh behind me even as I ran.

Although it was dark in the vaulted galleries it was not quite dark. I do not know where the faint glow of light came from, but there was enough to enable a man to move fairly freely. Shorty's cries had diminished to a hoarse babble or whimper, and I rushed toward the sound. Suddenly I came upon him—or rather I saw him at the end of a wide vaulted chamber, backed against a damp shimmering wall. In the dim light I could not see at first what it was that compassed him round so that he dared not flee. And then I saw and turned sick with horror. Huge and horrible creatures were slowly advancing upon him with their lobster-like claws held out menacingly in front of them. But what giant monstrosities were these! What nightmare visions, incredible and terrifying! I was rooted to the ground while my hair rose and stiffened on my scalp. And then one of the monsters brushed against me as it slowly advanced on its victim. I felt its coarse metallic hair and smelt a foul decaying smell from its filthy claws. Its sting was held high, ready to strike, and I could plainly see the venom pulsating in the transparent barb. There was a faint hissing noise from the creatures and a scratching, scrambling sound from their horny legs. I do not know how long I stood frozen with chill fear. It cannot have been more than a few seconds. It was that ghastly contact with the grisly brute that broke my resistance. With a shriek I turned and fled. Fled blindly, anywhere, any way, so long as I could get away from that frightful sight.

I must have dashed confusedly away without caring about the direction. The maze of passages and galleries engulfed me. I found doors barring my way, but I tore them open and fled on, thinking that I heard the door open again behind me as one of the monsters pursued me. It was my nightmare come true and I battered and bruised myself against stone walls till I was bleeding and breathless. And still the fear of those awful claws held threateningly forward drove me on. I thought the brute was closing in on me. I heard the sound of scraping footfalls behind me and I shrieked again. Turning and twisting through the interminable galleries I struggled on with my feet growing leaden till it was an effort to raise them from the ground. My pursuer was gaining on me. I made a last frantic effort, stumbled, recovered myself—and then two sinewy claws gripped my arms. I uttered a last scream and fainted. . . .

When I came to, I found the Raj Kumar and Boota Singh by my side. I was back in the airy room on the Fort wall looking out over the tree-tops of the Valley jungle. It was daylight and there was a fresh breeze blowing through the room. I lay on a pile of silken cushions and I looked up at the two men who bent over me so anxiously.

“Drink this!” commanded the Raj Kumar. But he spoke with the firm kindliness of a sick nurse and no longer with the haughty authority of the eldest son of a king. I drank thirstily. It was sweet sherbet—both food and drink—and my voice came back to me.

“Ranjit Singh!” I whispered huskily, and both men exclaimed with satisfaction.

“He knows us!”

“Boota Singh!” He held the cup to my lips again when I spoke his name.

“Good!” cried the Raj Kumar. “He will recover.”

"I'm all right," I went on. "What has happened?" And then I suddenly remembered and started up in alarm with an apprehensive look round.

"Nay, nay, Sahib," old Boota Singh counselled. "Rest quietly. There is naught to fear."

"But I saw . . ."

"Nay, nay, it was but a dream, an evil dream." The two men exchanged glances.

"My God! It was no dream," I whispered weakly. "It got me. What happened after it got me?"

"Nay, nay. It was I who seized you as you ran like a madman in your dream."

"You, Boota Singh!"

"Yes. His Highness has been very angry with me for letting you escape me. I ran after you, but I am an old man. I did what I could, but it was some time before I came up with you and caught you even as you fell senseless."

I heard what he said plainly enough, but it did not fit in with the dreadful memories that came flooding over me. But the pleasant surroundings and the cheerful sunlight that was pouring into the room soothed me and made my memories seem like the recollection of a dream. Boota Singh was looking at me with his kindly old face creased into a hundred wrinkles.

"So it was a dream?"

"Assuredly, Sahib."

"Boota Singh, I do not believe a word of what you are saying."

"Indeed, it was I who seized you by the arms. Your dream was so strong upon you that you cried out in fear when I touched you."

"And does a man dream dreams while he is running for his life?"

The Raj Kumar broke in upon our talk. "Now, Vallender, you must take things easily. Don't ask too many questions. You will find that your memory will

fade and your fears will abate. I was very afraid that your mind might have been affected by the shock. But that has not happened. You will recover quickly, and after a long sleep you will be yourself once more. It is always thus after . . . well, never mind all that. The sooner we forget about it the better."

I tried to ask a number of questions, but the Raj Kumar evaded them. His quiet, sensible manner soothed jangled nerves and presently I was enjoying a steaming cup of tea and a meal of fruit. But there was one question that I insisted on having answered.

"The American, Potts, is dead," replied the Raj Kumar with something of a return of his austere manner. "He was stung by a poisonous insect. He must have been in a very bad state of health or have had a weak heart. Men do not usually die from such a small thing."

"An insect? "

"Yes, a black scorpion."

I shuddered and closed my eyes, hearing again those despairing cries that I shall never be able to forget. Boota Singh touched me on the arm very gently. "Do not let your mind dwell on the matter, Sahib. It will fade."

I tried to take his advice, and asked about the other man. "What happened to Winger? "

"He fled from the Fort in a panic. He has not been seen since. No man stopped him."

"Did he take the jewels with him? "

"Of course. No man would stop him."

"But . . . will he be arrested before he leaves Sangar State? You will not let him get away with the loot? " My wits were not yet working very well or I should not have asked such a question. Neither of the two men replied, and before I could ask again the door opened and Indra Dass came in. He exclaimed with pleasure at the sight of me sipping tea and eating fruit,

"Good! No need for me to ask how you are. When you have slept you will wake completely recovered. And with only a confused memory of what took place last night. His Highness has told you?"

"Yes . . . he has told me."

"And you do not believe him?" Indra Dass laughed gently.

"I'm all adrift," I said. "Something has happened which is beyond my understanding. I suppose I shall never understand. Shorty is dead and Winger has escaped, so much I know."

"And you were protected from evil," the Brahmin said. "That is good news. Now, Mr. Vallender, if you are feeling stronger I suggest you return to your Camp and go to bed. You will sleep long and deep. Boota Singh will take you back. Your camel is ready."

"The Jabberwock?" The thought of the ungainly burbling brute helped to restore me to normal. "Yes, I'm all right. I am indeed desperately tired. Will you come and see me when I have slept and let me ask all the questions that I want to ask?"

"Certainly, with all my heart . . . if you still wish to ask questions when you wake."

I rose to my feet and was glad to find my strength returning to me. Supported on the Raj Kumar's arm I tottered to the courtyard outside, where a stretcher was awaiting me. Boota Singh hovered round solicitously, and the consciousness of the warm friendship of the three men brought a sense of comfort of which I stood in sore need.

"You will be carried to the Main Gate, Vallender, where your camel is waiting. I will bid you farewell there. There is much to be done before I shall see you again."

I was still unaware of the dreadful completeness of the revenge of Ranjit Singh and I spoke of banalities, saying how much I hoped to see him, inviting him to

come and have tea and so on, while he listened with a gravely smiling face.

"When all is accomplished I will come." He walked by my side and Indra Dass came too. Of all the nobility and gentry I had seen the night before, there was no sign. There were many servants and catchemaliveohs, as Winger had called them, but no others. Had they too been part of my dream that was no dream?

Boota Singh sat in the front saddle and drove the camel. I was too weary to take charge of the roaring complaining beast. I sat in the back saddle and nodded with fatigue as we went.

"Look, Sahib," said Boota Singh, pointing at the sky. A black cloud was spreading slowly, and a distant growl of thunder rumbled. "Indra is pleased with his people. He has spoken. There will be rain. But not till to-night. Not till all is accomplished."

CHAPTER TWELVE

THERE is little more to tell. The wheel came full circle, and the vengeance of Ranjit Singh was accomplished. But the Raj Kumar was wrong when he said that the memory of that fearful Christmas would fade. Sometimes it happens that the memory of a dream does not fade away, though usually it is difficult to remember a dream even a few minutes after waking. Not that I believe that I dreamt the events of Christmas night. I remember them too clearly for that to be true. But there is a queer hypnotic quality about everything that happened after the nautch girls stopped their singing. I cannot deny that. Even my recollection of the journey back to Camp from the Fort has a misty curtain over it.

We were jogging along through the jungle and, as I have said, I was nodding half-asleep with weariness. My lassitude increased and I got into the condition into which one falls on a train journey by night—waking and falling half asleep again, so that the passage of time is confused and erratic. I suddenly became aware that we had stopped and were surrounded by a crowd of hillmen. The Jabberwock was signifying his usual disapproval of anything out of the ordinary by horrible internal grumbles and piercing howls of rage. The noise woke me effectively and I asked sleepily what was up.

“It is the other man,” replied Boota Singh. “The one who fled.”

“Winger! Where is he?”

"He is dead, Sahib."

"Dead! Winger also? How did he die?"

"He was mauled by a tiger. How else should he die? Did I not say that Indra was pleased with the people? They are taking him to the Fort. Do not look upon his face, Sahib." Boota Singh spoke a word in the camel language telling the brute to rise, and in a few moments we were jogging along once more while my dulled brain took in the news about Winger. Curiously enough I was troubled about the jewels he had taken, wondering whether they had been recovered. The surfeit of horrors on which I had supped rendered me incapable of absorbing any more. Winger dead? But what of the jewels? . . . Strange as it may seem I dozed off again.

It was high noon by the time we reached the Camp. It seemed years since I had left it. We were seen coming from afar off, and men came running to meet us. I jerked into a clearer wakefulness and Boota Singh cried that all was well. He had a joyful ring in his voice and the people shouted when he cried that all was being accomplished and that Indra would be pleased. I think they were glad to see me, but it was Boota Singh's news that gave them the greatest delight. Abdul was on the verandah when we reached my bungalow and he showered a hundred inquiries upon me.

"Allah be praised!" he vociferated again and again. "The Prophet has delivered you out of the hands of those wicked men."

He fussed round, helping me from the camel and installing me in a comfortable chair on the verandah. "Is all indeed well with you, Sahib?" he demanded anxiously, peering into my eyes.

"Yes. I am tired out, that is all."

"What of the evil men? I can learn naught from these unbelievers who only babble of their false god."

"The Americans are dead," I answered.

Abdul froze into a shocked silence. Then he asked who killed them.

"No man killed them, Abdul. One man died from a scorpion sting. The other was killed by a tiger."

"So!" The duster was flicked here and there uncertainly for a time and then Abdul remarked with satisfaction. "Then there can be no trial and no inquiry with many lawyers clouding counsel with overmuch talk. That is good! It only remains for you to dismiss the last of the evil men. Then all will be well."

Donovan! As usual I had forgotten him. "He has run away," I told Abdul. "We shall not see him again."

"Not so. He is here. But he must go. Otherwise the Hindus will kill him. And a very good thing too," he added tartly.

"Here!"

"Assuredly. He returned last night saying he was sick. He is in his quarters. No man will go near him."

"Why not? If the man is sick . . ."

"Nay, I do not know. The unbelievers speak only of their idols whom they call gods."

"Of Indra!"

"Nay! I know not the names of their idols." Abdul spoke with fanatical zeal. "They say that they will not interfere with the vengeance of their god."

"We can't leave the man alone if he is ill." I rose to my feet feeling stronger, though still infinitely weary. "I am going to see him. Send the Compounder to meet me at Mistri Donovan's quarters."

"Sahib! Do not go!"

"Nonsense, Abdul! You surely do not believe in the talk about vengeance?"

"Nay! That is false talk. But . . . the man is ill with cholera! Do not go near him!"

"Cholera! Good heavens! Every minute is important." I made an effort and overcame my natural

repugnance for the dread disease. It was impossible to leave Donovan to his fate, whatever he had done. Besides, there would be steps to be taken to prevent the spread of the infection. I hastened away, pursued by horrified protests from Abdul.

There was no one near Donovan's hut. Everyone had withdrawn to a distance, and only a sparse ring of on-lookers saw me go into the hut. The foul reek of infection sickened me as I went in to where Donovan lay very still on a tumbled heap of bedding. He was still alive and he recognized me.

"Water!" he gasped feebly, and I gave it him. "More!" I gave it to him again. He was almost black in the face and his skin was shrivelled and wilted like a rotten apple.

"Can you bear to be moved?" I asked. "I'll get you out of this into the hospital. The Compounder is coming. We'll put you on a stretcher in no time. . . ."

I spoke comforting words, but I could see there was no hope for him. The furious stage of the frightful disease had abated, and he lay weak and still with a merciful coma stealing over him. He must have suffered dreadfully during the night with no one to solace him in his dire need, and a wave of pity for the poor, foundering derelict submerged all else. There was a bustle at the entrance and the Compounder came in.

"I'm glad you have come, babu," I said. "I was afraid that you would refuse to come. Everyone has deserted the man."

"I know my duty, Sahib. But it is useless to do anything. It is the black cholera and he will die. Give him as much water as he can drink. It will make his passing easier."

"It's all right," came a feeble whisper from Donovan. "The pain has gone. I feel fine."

"That is well, Sahib. He will slip away peacefully now. Better leave him alone. Presently we will

burn the hut with him in it. The air is not good here."

"Don't go, Vallender," the whisper came again. Donovan groped feebly with his hand, and I could not make out what he wanted. Then I tumbled to it.

"Under your pillow? Is that it? Something under the pillow?" I felt there and withdrew an untidy bundle done in what might once have been a handkerchief, knotted tightly. "Am I to open it?" I tugged at the knots and suddenly the miserable bundle fell open. A shower of rupees clattered on to the concrete floor, running and tinkling in all directions as they fell.

"Water!" I gave it to him and his voice became stronger. "The black cloud! It got me at last. I tried to run from it, but it was no good." I gave him more water. "I had an idea that if I did one decent thing I might escape it. Death-bed repentance sort of idea." A ghost of his sneering defiant manner showed for an instant. "You were the only man who had ever been decent to me. I thought . . . I meant to cheat you . . . I thought if I paid you that thirty rupees I might hold the black cloud back until I could get away . . . right away." I did not know what to say. Pity for the poor wretch choked me. "Count!"

"What?"

"Count them!" I groped here and there for the rupees and counted them while Donovan's eyes watched me. "There are thirty all right," I said, and there came a faint sigh from the bed. "You have paid me back in full." There was no response and his breathing was now very faint. He raised his right hand slightly, but he was too weak to lift it from the bed. "You want to hold my hand? Is that it?" I took the shrivelled claw in mine. There was a faintly responsive pressure from him.

"He is going, Sahib! "

I let go his hand and it fell back. There was again a metallic tinkle on the floor, and I saw that Donovan's signet ring had slipped off his wasted finger. I picked it up and put it into my pocket.

"It is the end, Sahib. All is now accomplished! It is finished."

I looked down at the quiet figure on the bed. In death the poor derelict looked more than ever insignificant. But a look of peace had come over his blackened features. A derelict! Drifting about the world at the mercy of every current and wind! What dreadful damage these poor creatures do, even though they are themselves incapable of active harm! Helpless even to help themselves!

The Compounder touched me on the arm. "Sahib! Come away. The air is not good here. Go to your bungalow and take off your clothes and burn them. Take a bath in disinfectant. And more important than all, put that ring through the fire! "

We went out. Old Boota Singh was waiting for me at the edge of the circle of those who watched. "He is dead," I said. There was a sigh, almost a groan from the people. There followed a murmur, which swelled and swelled until at last they broke into song, a hymn with many wailing cadences strange to Western ears. My utter weariness returned to me and I could hardly drag myself back to the bungalow. My feet were like lead, but Boota Singh helped me. Abdul came running too. The desire for sleep surged over me.

"Indra is pleased with the people," boomed Boota Singh, his voice seeming to come from afar off. There was the fresh smell of rain in the air—a cleansing smell giving promise of a rain-washed world. There was a brilliant flash of lightning and a roar of thunder. The chant swelled to a shriller note. The last thing I remembered as I stretched out on my bed luxuriating in

its comfort was the loud pattering of rain on the roof and the sweet smell of a cool wind blowing through the bungalow.

The ring? There was no trouble in tracing the family to which the crest on the ring belonged, no trouble at all. But since the derelict chose to go down without disclosing his name . . . better not tell, far better not.

He had

